



99: The Savior by cali-chan

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Summary: "Save the lost child, save the world." Initially, Mike thinks future!Dustin was talking about Will. But then he and his friends find a telekinetic girl wandering around the forest on a rainy night, and now he isn't so sure. PG-13, general/sci-fi, canon pairings.

1. Chapter 1

The Savior. PG-13, general/sci-fi, canon pairings.

"Save the lost child, save the world." Initially, Mike thinks future!Dustin was talking about Will. But then he and his friends find a telekinetic girl wandering around the forest on a rainy night, and now he isn't so sure.

Note: This will mostly follow the plot of the TV show with some very specific changes. Any scene from the show you don't see here, it's because it happens more or less the same as it did on the show.

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"It was a seven."

Mike turns to Will with a confused expression. "Huh?"

"The roll," Will explains further, looking up at his friend from the seat of his bike. "It was a seven. The Demogorgon— it got me."

"Oh. Okay," Mike says, caught a little off guard. Now that their campaign had been interrupted by his mother, he isn't hung up on the little details; the hype has deflated a bit. Besides, he has something else on his mind. "Um, Will?" he asks. "That girl you drew... with the punk clothes and her hand outstretched in front of her... who is she?"

Will's eyes widen. "You saw that?" he asks, looking surprised and a little worried.

"Yeah." At one point during a particularly rambunctious reaction, Will's bag had fallen off the back of his chair and his stuff had spilled on the floor. Mike was closer, so he'd bent over to help pick everything up. "Your sketchbook fell open to that page earlier and I caught a glimpse," Mike says.

He doesn't add that the drawing caught his eye because the girl seemed so familiar. There's no way he can explain that he's been

having dreams about that same girl— her hair is blond instead of dark and she's wearing different clothes, but Mike has no doubt it's the same girl— for a few days now. "Who is she?" he asks again, instead. "Do you know her from somewhere?"

Once again, Will looks shocked and a little uncomfortable. "No, I, uh — I made her up," he finally stutters out, not too convincingly. "You know, like a D&D character. I just thought... I thought it would be a cool style, that's all."

Mike nods, wanting to press further but at the same time not wanting to reveal what's been going on with him. He already feels like he's going crazy as it is. "Well," Will says. "The guys are probably waiting for me. See you tomorrow!" he says and starts pedaling away from Mike's garage like there was a monster on his tail. Mike watches him go, his stomach roiling with unease.

Then he catches sight of the garage lights flickering behind him and when he turns to look, he finds himself face to face with Dustin. "Why are you still here? I could've sworn I saw you bike away with the others," he tells his friend, who just stands there looking around like he can't believe where he is. "Did you go to the bathroom or something? Will's already gone on without you."

He narrows his eyes. Something's different... last he saw Dustin, he'd been wearing a brown jacket and a white t-shirt; now, he's wearing a maroon hoodie, and his t-shirt is bright yellow. The night is dark, but it's not dark enough for him not to be able to tell the difference. "Did you change your clothes?"

"It worked!" Dustin says with a big, toothy grin. Then he turns to Mike urgently. "Listen, I don't have much time, even with Steve helping me—"

"Steve?" Mike interrupts with a befuddled expression. Steve as in *Steve Harrington*? Since when does Dustin even talk to Mike's sister's new boyfriend? "Dustin, what are you—"

"Mike! Focus!" Dustin exclaims, snapping his fingers in front of Mike's face suddenly, which makes Mike take a step back in surprise. "Listen, I'm not that Dustin. Well, I am, but not yet. I'm from the

future."

Mike lifted one eyebrow as he stared back at his friend with a flat expression. "The future. Right." He looked around them, searching for something. "Is Lucas going to jump out from behind the trash bin to scare me now?"

"This isn't a *joke*," Dustin presses in an imperative tone. "Listen, I don't have much time, and there's something you *need* to know." He takes a deep breath and continues speaking before Mike has a chance to interrupt. "Someone's in trouble, and we're the only ones who can help them. We *have* to save them, otherwise something really bad will happen."

"What? What do you mean 'bad'?" Mike asks. He still doesn't believe any of this is real— his friends are pulling a prank on him, surely— but he's a sucker for a good story.

"I mean 'bad' as in *hundreds-of-people-will-die* bad," Dustin elaborates, emphasizing his words with a nod of his head. "Look, I don't have time to explain. I'm already being pulled back, I can feel it." Mike has no idea what he means by that— he doesn't see anything pulling Dustin anywhere. "Just remember," Dustin adds, "save the lost child, save the world."

"Lost child? What lost child? Dustin—" The garage lights flicker again, and Mike cuts himself off to look up at the lamp, worried that it might go out completely. It doesn't, and when Mike turns back to his friend, Dustin is gone.

Mike looks around for any sign of him (or Lucas), but his eyes don't catch anything. So he shakes his head, rolls his eyes, and calls out, "Real funny, guys!" into the night before moving to turn off the garage lights and heading back inside.

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The next morning, Chief Jim Hopper wakes up in his trailer still

tired, in pain, and honestly, still a little bit drunk.

He's already late, so he figures he might as well take some time for a smoke before (reluctantly) getting ready for work. Then he takes a quick and completely unrelaxing shower, trims his mustache, gets dressed, pops a couple of pills and swallows them down with what's left of his (fifth or sixth) beer from last night.

Once he's dressed, he takes a deep breath, puts on his hat, and makes his way out of his trailer without bothering to turn off the television, and without noticing that, somehow, his beer can has ended up embedded in the laminate surface of his bathroom sink.

He wouldn't notice that until later. As it stands, he has to steel himself to step into the tedium that is everyday small-town policing, and no amount of coffee and contemplation could prepare him for dealing with a distraught Joyce Byers first thing in the morning.

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"Just find my son, Hop. Find him!"

Jesus, Joyce, calm down. Kid's been gone for half a day, there's no need to go into hysterics.

Now, Joyce considers herself a fairly patient person, if a little high-strung, but *that* is the straw that breaks the camel's back for her. "I am *not* hysterical!" she throws back, first taking a second to glare at him like she used to do when they were young and he was being a dick (which happened more often than he would ever admit), and then starting to pace in front of his desk again.

"Joyce, I didn't say—"

"And I know, *I know* he hasn't been missing for 24 hours, or however long it is that you cops are supposed to wait," she continues without letting him get a word in edgewise, "but Will has never spent the night away from home without letting me know first, and I can't— I

can't just— sit and wait and go to work and pretend everything's *normal* because whatever's happening here, Hop, it is most definitely *not* normal."

She pauses only to breathe and glare at Hopper some more. "Something's wrong, I can *feel* it, and I know you don't care, but just because *your* daughter didn't—" Joyce cuts herself off as soon as she realizes what she's saying, knowing she's pushing it too far, but from his stony expression— a litany of *Sara Sara Sara Sara* bouncing violently against a foot-thick wall of ice— she knows she wasn't fast enough.

"I'm sorry," she apologizes quickly, sincerely; she can only imagine how painful it must be for him to be reminded of what happened to his little girl. "I'm just— you understand, right?" she adds, pausing in her pacing to look hopefully at him. "If my son is in danger, and there was something I could've done, and I didn't at least try..."

Hopper swallows hard and says, "I know, Joyce," before standing up and walking around his desk so he could stand in front of her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Look, you go call Lonnie, okay? And look for a recent picture of the kid, maybe we could put up some flyers around town in case anyone's seen him. I'll go ask around; maybe one of his friends knows something. But we don't have to wait around, all right? We're gonna find your boy."

Joyce nods, feeling a little comfort in the fact that when she looks up into Hopper's face, she can see his determination not to fail Will like he'd failed Sara. She is so frazzled, so worried about her son, that it doesn't even occur to her that Hopper had never told her his daughter's name, at least not that she could remember.

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As soon as they left the Principal's office, Mike pulls Dustin and Lucas into the A/V Club room and tells them all about his weird encounter from the night before. Dustin seems into it the moment Mike

mentions superpowers, but Lucas, as expected, is skeptical. "Look," he starts, "I think it's cute that you're fantasizing about Dustin like this, but we've got other things to be worrying about right now. Like, you know, our missing friend."

"But that's the thing, Lucas!" Dustin exclaims. "What if this *does* have something to do with Will? You heard what he said." He shakes his head. "What I said. Whatever. You heard it loud and clear: *save the lost child*. If that's not Will, who else is it going to be?"

Lucas sighs and rolls his eyes. "How are you buying this?"

Instead of answering his rhetorical question, Dustin turned to Mike. "Did I look older?"

Mike remains quiet for a moment, thinking. "Not really," he replies, trying to think back to every detail he could recall. "But you were wearing different clothes. And— oh!" He snaps his fingers as an important detail comes back to him. "You had teeth!"

"My teeth had come in?" Dustin asks, his lips immediately drawing into a bright, wide grin. "Man! My teeth come in, I hang out with Steve Harrington, and I have superpowers! I like this future," he quips, elbowing Lucas's side.

Lucas groans. "'This future' is not real," he declares, then turns to Mike. "You can't seriously think any of this is real. You probably just ate something weird and indigestion made you have a nightmare or something."

It's Mike's turn to roll his eyes. "Right. And then out of all the people in Hawkins, *our friend Will* just happens to go missing that exact same night." He shakes his head. "Lucas! Come on. That *can't* be a coincidence."

But Lucas doesn't budge. It isn't until later that night when he finally started to give a little. "This isn't about your hallucination from yesterday again, is it?" he asks after Mike radioes him, shortly after dinner. "I think your imagination is getting the better of you, man. Over."

"It wasn't a hallucination," Mike replies, "but no, I'm not talking about that. Over."

"Then what is it? Over."

"Leaving aside the whole saving-the-world thing," Mike posited, "we should still do something about Will. Go look for him or something. If my encounter from last night was real, then we'll have done something amazing; and if it *was* just a nightmare like you said earlier, then we'll at least have found Will! Over."

Lucas still didn't seem fully convinced. "The cops are already looking for him. You really think we'd find him before they do? Over."

"We've been down Mirkwood a thousand times in our lives, Lucas! We can find him, I'm sure we can. And you *know* Will would do the same for us. Remember yesterday? He could've cast Protection last night, but he didn't. He cast Fireball. Over."

"What's your point? Over."

"My point is," Mike retorted, "he could've played it safe, but he didn't. He put himself in danger to help the party. Over."

Lucas remains silent for almost half a minute, and that's when Mike knows he's broken his resolve. "Meet me in ten. Over and out," Lucas finally says, and Mike has to keep himself from cheering into the walkie. Instead, he starts throwing things inside his bag and starts looking for his raincoat, just in case.

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"So, listen, this is gonna sound a little weird," Mike asks Eleven once he's handed her a warm and toasty Eggo and she's bitten into it with gusto, "but I just need you to go out there. Then go to the front door and ring the doorbell. My mom will answer. You can't tell her about last night or that you know me. Understand? Just tell her that you're lost and that you need help. She'll know what to do."

He pauses as his own words register in his ears. "That's right... you were lost last night when we found you, weren't you?" he asks. *Like Will*, he thinks, although he doesn't say that part out loud. Initially, Mike had thought that future!Dustin was talking about Will in their encounter two nights ago. But then he and his friends found a girl wandering around the forest on a rainy night, and now he isn't so sure.

Eleven nods, and Mike wonders what that means in regards to future!Dustin's message. Not for the first time, he finds himself wishing future!Dustin had been more explicit. Why did messages from the future always have to be so vague? He'd only spoken of one lost child, so it could be Will *or* Eleven. But how would they know which? Mike figured he would ask his Mom to help Eleven either way, just in case, while they looked for Will. They could kill two birds with one stone that way. He would have no world-ending catastrophes on his watch.

But if it isn't El, then how could he explain the fact that he'd been dreaming about her for a few days already? She looks different in his dreams, but he's sure it is her. When you put that together with Will's drawing and future!Dustin's warning, how can it mean anyone else? And does it make him a terrible friend for choosing Eleven over Will? He's still determined to help both of them, of course— he would never just abandon Will— but there is something about El that just... draws him to her. Even if she turns out not to be the person Dustin meant, he still wants to help her. He has to.

"Anyway," he adds when he realizes that he's been quiet for too long and Eleven is staring at him questioningly, "it's no big deal. We'll just pretend to meet each other again. And my mom, she'll know who to call."

But Eleven says no, and when she reveals she's being chased by bad people who are trying to hurt her, Mike's blood chills. When she mimics a gun pointed at her head and then at his, he realizes he can't get his mother involved in this; he can't get anyone new involved in this. They are going to have to help Eleven on their own— save her from people with guns!— all the while also looking for Will.

Why couldn't saving the world just be *easy*?

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"All that matters is, after school, the freak will be back in the loony bin, and we can focus on what really matters: Finding Will," Lucas declares as Mr. Clarke moves to the front of the room to check his notes before the class has to start.

"You *just* said you thought Mike's plan had failed," Dustin reminds him, leaning forward in his desk.

"Well, we won't know until after school," Lucas retorted with a shake of his head. "It's only first period. Can we not talk about this until later? It's gonna get really old with you going on and on and on about superpowers every five minutes until three."

"Oh!" Dustin says suddenly, like a super cool idea had just occurred to him. "Maybe I can fast-forward time until school's out. Watch the clock for me," he signals Lucas to look at the clock on the wall above the blackboard before closing his eyes and pretending to make a lot of effort, making sounds almost like it hurt. His "hnngh" sound was so loud that the girl sitting in front of him turns to look, probably wondering if he was trying to go number two in his seat.

Lucas rolls his eyes and shakes his head. "Quit it. You look like an idiot," he mutters between his teeth, abashed at his friend's behavior.

Dustin opens his eyes and looks up at the clock again. "Did it work?" He frowns when he realizes even if it *had* worked, he couldn't tell the difference anyway. With a sigh, he turns to Lucas. "Man! The seconds hand didn't move ahead even just a little?"

Lucas looks at him with a deadpan expression. "You don't have superpowers," he insists for what feels like the seventeenth time just that day.

Dustin clicks his tongue at him. "Maybe I just need more practice," he suggests with a pout just as Mr. Clarke straightens up and starts his lecture on the exciting world of photosynthesis.

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"Yeah, uh, I was thinking... two weeks?"

"Um, yes, I understand but— you know, I have to pay Jeffrey for covering," Donald replies, and his jaw tightens, and Joyce can almost hear him thinking *You've worked here long enough, Joyce. You know very well I can't afford to pay both of you at the same time.*

It is *that*, more than anything, that strengthens her resolve. She plucks up her courage and goes for it. "Donald. I've been here... ten years, right? Have I ever called in sick or missed a shift once? I've worked, uh, Christmas Eve and Thanksgiving."

Damn it, Joyce, is what she sees when she looks into his eyes, and she knows she's breaking him, so she doubles down. "I don't know where my boy is. He's gone. I don't know if I'm gonna ever see him again, if he's hurt... I, uh, I need this phone, and two weeks' advance."

Great. How do you say no to that? She could ask me for anything and I'd have to say yes. Donald nods and moves to open the register. Joyce bounces a little on the balls of her feet, looks down at the money in his hands, and decides one more little request won't hurt. "And a pack of Camels."

He stares at her for a moment, like saying *Really?* Eventually, Donald nods, and Joyce bends over backward thanking him for his help. She feels a little bit terrible for manipulating him like that, but only a little bit. She needs this. Smoking calms her down, and she's going to need a lot of calming down until Hopper finds her Will.

Plus, smoking helps her focus a little bit less on what other people might be thinking— and she can't afford that right now. Not when her son is in danger.

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When Lonnie suddenly appears and pins Jonathan to the wall, he's caught off guard for a second, before he feels himself tremble with anger. "Get off!" he growls before pushing Lonnie away from him so hard that he slams against the opposite wall with a loud thud.

"Shit, that hurt!" Lonnie exclaims, just as Cynthia yells out his name, sounding scared. She comes up to her boyfriend and starts fussing over him, checking him all over for injuries, but Lonnie just points to the back of his head and asks, "Am I bleeding?"

When the answer is negative, he shakes his head and turns to Jonathan, who's still where he was standing before, watching him warily. "Damn, you've gotten stronger," Lonnie says, almost— *almost* — sounding like he's proud.

"Will someone please explain what the hell is going on?" Cynthia screeches, looking between the two of them like they're some sideshow spectacle.

"Jonathan, Cynthia," Lonnie signals to his girlfriend, then the opposite way. "Cynthia, this is Jonathan. My oldest." He pauses for a moment and looks him up and down. "Come here," he then says, moving forward to pull his son in for a hug.

This time Jonathan sees it coming, and pushes him away by shoving his shoulder. "Get off me, man," he repeats just as Lonnie lifts a hand to rub at his arm, like Jonathan's shove hurt him bad.

"Damn," he says, hissing in pain as he touches the joint. "You liftin' weights or something?" he asks, but Jonathan isn't in the mood to give him the time of day. All he needs is to find Will, so he ignores Lonnie's theatrics and turns on his heels to walk into the nearest bedroom, hoping his little brother would be there.

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They're still staring slackjawed at Eleven, whose nose is bleeding—bleeding!— and oh, who also happens to have closed the door to Mike's room *with her mind*, when Mike's mom's voice startles them out of their shock. "Michael, you can't slam the door like that! You'll damage it." Then the doorknob shakes. "And why are you locked in? What are you doing in there?"

The four of them look at each other with eyes wide as plates as the doorknob shakes again. "Michael?"

"Um, I'm just— changing!" Mike blurts out an impromptu excuse, clearly the first thing that pops into his mind. "I spilled something on my shirt. I'll be right out!"

As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he turns to Eleven. "You have to go in the closet again," he declares in a whisper, and Dustin and Lucas have no idea when the first time was, but they're both just as urgently wishing for her to hide *somewhere*.

"Oh, well, give it to me, then," Mike's mom's voice comes in through the closed door again. "I've got a load ready to wash." The doorknob shakes yet again, and the three boys look at each other, panic spiking. "Michael?"

They turn to Eleven again, Mike's eyes pleading. "El, *please*."

"But..." the girl says, clearly reluctant, almost like she was about to protest, but then she doesn't say another word.

Mike seems to get what she's trying to say, though, because his tone softens immediately. "I know, I'm sorry. I won't close the door all the way, I promise. We'll leave it open just a sliver and I'll stand in front of it, but unless you want my mom to find you, you have to hide."

They're all pleading for her to go into the closet when they hear the lock on the door unlatch. They turn to look at it horrified just as the doorknob turns all the way and the door starts to open.

"Mom, *stop*!"

All of a sudden, it's like every movement *halts*. The door is halfway open, and Mike's mom is half past the doorframe, but it's like she's

frozen, mouth partway through forming a sound, eyes fixed right in front of her but looking like she wasn't really seeing anything. She isn't moving. She isn't even blinking. The air around them feels stale, still, like it does in the summer when the A/C is turned off.

Mike turns to his friends with a gobsmacked expression on his face, and they return it. They turn to El, wondering if she did this, but she shakes her head, just as surprised as all three of them are.

They're all silent for a moment before someone screams "Oh my God!" and then they're all cheering together, realizing that one of them (maybe Dustin because of the whole future prophecy thing, but even *he's* not sure) has achieved something *mind-blowingly amazing*.

"You have to hide," Mike is the first one to remember how they got to that point. He quickly ushers Eleven into the closet, leaving the door open just a sliver, like he had promised. He stands at an angle in front of the door, where he thinks his mother won't be able to see El, and tells Dustin, "Okay, unfreeze it." Because that's how it works in comics, right? Time can't just remain frozen forever.

Dustin tries clapping, clapping twice, jumping, flapping his arms, screaming "Go!" and even using Professor Xavier's signature hand gestures, but nothing works. Lucas even gives it a go, but it becomes clear quickly enough that he's not the one doing this either. It's not until Mike sighs and mutters "All right, that's enough," that the world starts moving forward again, and then his mother is on him and he doesn't even have a chance to react.

"Okay, hand the shirt over," she says, and Mike stands there stiffly for a minute, not entirely sure how to respond. His brain is still stuck on what happened just a moment ago, and he's only just realizing that he hadn't actually changed his shirt like he'd told her he had.

"Oh, uh," he stutters for a minute before getting his bearings again. "Yeah, uh, I thought I had spilled something on the back, but Lucas just let me know that I didn't," he finally says. He turns around slightly to show his mother that the back of his shirt was still pristine.

"All right," she retorts, though they aren't sure she 100% believes him as she's still giving him a suspicious look. But regardless, she seems to

buy it well enough. "Don't slam the door," she warns, pointing a finger at him in that way moms often do. "And don't lock it." With that, she pulls out of the room.

As the door gently slides closed in her wake, Mike steps away quickly so that El can come out of the closet, and they stare at each other with wide eyes for half a minute, still in shock, before Lucas interrupts by jumping on Mike, pushing down on his shoulders. "You stopped time!"

Mike's mouth draws into a bright grin. "I stopped time!" he similarly exclaims and starts jumping just as exuberantly. He pulls El by the arm and she laughs, starting to jump with them and enjoying the moment just as much as the other two.

The only one left out is Dustin, who sits down on Mike's bed with a pout. "Man! I thought manipulating time was my thing!" he complains, watching the other three with as they jumped around the room and he didn't. "Son of a bitch," he mutters, but he's only partly disappointed— he's sad that he wasn't the one to do it, but at the same time that was still the coolest experience of his life...

It doesn't take long for him to join the others in their excitement.

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It's just Dustin's luck that when he finally manages to stop time on his own, none of his friends are around to see it— mainly because they're all frozen by his awesome time-manipulating powers.

It happens right after Mike's mom kind of invites them all to a school event for Will that he's pretty sure Nancy's making up anyway. Her mother clearly doesn't know that, though, so she seems pretty confused when they all refuse, and they're all scrambling to think of an excuse when suddenly El comes down the stairs and walks across the entrance of the dining room.

Lucas startles, Mike almost chokes on his milk, and Dustin almost

jumps out of his seat when it looks for a second like Mike's mom is going to turn around and catch El in flagrante. But then, suddenly, everything goes still.

Really, "still" was an understatement. Droplets from Mike's spit-take are floating on air as if someone had taken a photo at the exact moment he coughed. Dustin marvels at it for a minute before he realizes he's literally the only person in the room who can still move. He doesn't know how he did it, but this time it is definitely his doing.

He quickly stands up and runs toward El; he doesn't know how this power works, so he doesn't know how much time he has, and he has to make sure she isn't seen. He quickly drags her toward the door to the basement— she is surprisingly light when frozen in time, something he will ponder about later— and hopes she will get the hint when time starts moving forward again.

He comes back to his seat and has a brief moment of panic when he can't remember what Mike had said earlier to restart the flow of time — what if he'd just hit on the magic words by accident and now Dustin couldn't get them right? Frustrated, he bangs twice on the table, and next thing he knows, everybody's heads, even Holly's, are snapping toward him in distress.

"Sorry," he says, giving them all a sheepish smile. "Spasm."

Later, when he and Lucas and Mike are down in the basement with Eleven, he tries to convince them of the incredible feat of superpowers they had just missed. "I'm telling you, I froze time! It really did happen!"

Lucas groans. "Stop. You're just jealous because Mike was able to do it and you weren't."

"I'm telling you, I just did it a few minutes ago!" Dustin insists, turning to Mike. "You saw El in the entrance to the dining room, right?" Mike assents. "And suddenly she was just gone, right?" Mike assents again. Dustin points at himself emphatically. "Exactly! That was it! That was me! I stopped time right at that moment, and then I moved her so that your mom wouldn't see her."

He turns to El, instead. "You were walking past the dining room entrance, weren't you?" She nods, eyes wide. "And then you were suddenly standing in front of the basement door, right?" She nods again. "And you don't know how you got there, right?" She shakes her head this time. Dustin turns to Lucas. "See? That's because she was frozen and I moved her!"

Lucas still doesn't seem convinced. "We don't know what her powers all are. Maybe she teleported herself or something without realizing it."

El shakes her head, and Dustin is glad for once to have the telekinetic girl on his side. He glares at Lucas. "Really? You'll let her have two different superpowers before you let me have even one?"

Lucas rolls his eyes. "I'm just saying, Mike already has a superpower. What are the odds of you having the exact same one?"

"Well, maybe he's copying *my* superpower!" Dustin retorts, sounding offended. "Have you ever thought about *that* possibility, huh, Lucas? After all, I was the one who traveled back from the future two nights ago, not Mike."

"It would've been weird for Mike to travel back in time to talk to himself," Lucas throws back with a vigorous shake of his head. "Maybe it would've caused a time paradox or something. We don't know what the rules are!"

"I'm pretty sure we can guess what the rules are—"

"Guys. Guys!" Mike finally interrupts, having had enough of their bickering for the moment. "It doesn't matter. If Dustin does have superpowers, he'll figure them out eventually. In the meantime what matters is that El wasn't found out, and we can go out to look for Will tomorrow after school. So make sure to pack anything you think we might need. We meet here in the morning."

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"Just— just give me a minute out here," Hopper asks, and watches distractedly as Sandra makes her way back inside, not really intending to follow anytime soon.

He knows very well he won't get any sleep that night; he can feel it in his bones. That's why, instead of heading back to bed, he makes his way to the bathroom, to splash some water on his face. If he's going to be up all night, he might as well try to remain as awake as possible so he could think of the next moves to make in the search. He needs his senses sharp.

Just as he's drying himself off and looking up at his obviously weathered face in the mirror, he notices something odd. There's a beer can by his left hand— that in itself isn't odd at all, as his trailer was often littered with trash he never bothered to clean out— but the beer can in question is half embedded into the surface of the sink in a way that... shouldn't have been possible.

He tugs at it experimentally, trying to figure out if the furniture had cracked or rotted, causing the can to simply fall through. No deal; it was shoved in tightly. He opens the cabinet under the sink and can see just a little bit of the bottom of the can peeking out through the thick wood. It was almost like someone had drilled a hole into his bathroom sink and shoved the can in tightly with a hammer— except that surely would've dented the can, and it did not seem damaged in any way.

And anyway, who would do that? Through his years as Chief of Police of a small town, Hopper had had to deal with his fair share of stupid pranks— kids these days needed to find better hobbies, dammit— but this seemed too small and too inconsequential to be the work of some cocky teenager trying to pull a fast one on an authority figure. And the last time he remembered seeing that beer can was when he took his pills two mornings ago...

Curious, he tries to take a look inside the can; maybe whoever had done this had left some kind of calling card or signature— or worse: dog shit, or something equally nasty. Thankfully, he can't smell anything like that, only the typical smell of beer, but he also can't see very well at this hour, so he doesn't know if there's anything inside the can.

Figuring he already has enough to deal with without getting dragged into some kid's stupid prank war, he takes a quick look around for anything else out of place, just to be thorough, but finds nothing, so he goes back to bed, where he proceeds to toss around and stare at the ceiling until the sun comes up.

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As Joyce stacked up packages of Christmas lights on the checkout counter, she could just *feel* Donald looking at her like he was thinking *This is it. She's finally gone 'round the bend. She's not gonna ask for another advance on her salary, is she?*

That's why, when she heard him start a sentence, she was ready with a glare and a straightforward response. "Just ring me up, Donald."

He must've read in her expression that she wasn't in the mood to argue, so he did exactly as told.

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It happens just after Troy trips Mike.

They spend the first half of their recess period looking for rocks for the Wrist Rocket (or, well, Mike and Lucas do— Dustin spends most of that time throwing rocks into the air and trying to freeze time before they hit the ground, but he's never able to do it), and just as Lucas starts teasing Mike about his (very obvious, in Dustin's opinion) growing crush on Eleven, Troy and James make their appearance.

Dustin stands up just as they start taunting them about Will, saying he's probably dead and they'll never find him, and Mike encourages them to ignore the two bullies, but just as he tries to walk past them, Troy sticks his foot out and trips him, causing him to fall.

Lucas and Dustin are too far behind to catch him and prevent him from knocking his chin against a large rock on the ground with a pained bellow, but Dustin doesn't even get a chance to move before everything starts happening *backward*, the world around him suddenly looking like a VCR tape being rewound.

"...he was probably killed by some other queer," Troy is saying. Again. Just like he had a minute ago. Or had he?

Mike groans just as Dustin realizes what's happening, what he just did. "Come on. Just ignore them," he says, and as he starts taking a step forward, Dustin grabs him by the arm and yanks him about a foot to the side. "What are you doing?" he hisses, seeming annoyed that Dustin had interrupted his dramatic walkout.

"Just watch where you're going," Dustin retorts, satisfied now that he'd moved his friend out of the path he had previously been about to take.

"Yeah, watch where you're going, Frogface," Troy sneers, and trips him again, only this time Mike falls right against soft grass rather than smacking his chin against the rock. He gets grass stains on his jacket and mud tracks on his jeans, but there's no blood anywhere, and Dustin mentally pats himself on the back for a job well done, even if he hadn't exactly *meant* to do it in the first place.

These time-manipulation powers could come in handy.

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"Joyce, I want you to know something," Karen starts. "If you need anything— anything at all— Ted and I are here for you."

And Joyce knows she means it. Karen can be a little clueless sometimes, too caught up in her pristine suburban mom life to understand certain things, but Joyce could tell very clearly that when she tells her this, she is sincere. And Joyce appreciates that, whether she could really be of any help or not.

So she thanks her and tries to make small talk about Mike and tries to accept her casserole with as much gratefulness as she can muster under the circumstances. She tries to share her feelings in a somewhat superficial matter— she couldn't exactly tell Karen about how she was trying to communicate with Will, nor about the... other stuff... that was suddenly going on in her life— but when Holly goes off exploring in Will's room of all places, that's when Joyce's patience hits the limit.

Then she sees the terrified expression on the girl's face and realizes there is more to this than just a little child's curiosity run amok. "Wait, did you see something?" Holly nods, taking her hand up to her mouth as if she were about to suck her thumb. "What did what did you see? Tell me," Joyce insists. "What did you see?"

Monster, the girl is thinking, but cannot verbalize. *Scary monster. Wanna go home!*

Internally, Joyce both cheers and despairs. She feels vindicated because she's not going crazy, she's not seeing things— something really did come out of Will's bedroom wall. She despairs because there's a monster hunting for her son and the only person who will ever believe her is a three-year-old girl. How do you fight something like that on your own, when you don't even understand it yourself?

"What— Joyce. Joyce!" Karen tries to interject, surely to ask why she was suddenly screaming in her daughter's face, but Joyce can't deal with her anymore after the knowledge she just gained. What she needs is to get them both out of there right away.

"Listen, Karen, thank you for the casserole, but I need you to leave," she declares. "Okay?" She pushes them toward the exit, only feeling a teeny bit guilty. After all, Holly has just confirmed that her house is dangerous. If she has to be rude to ensure their safety, that's what she will do.

When they finally leave, Joyce makes a beeline for her pack of Camels. She really could use a cigarette just about then.

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"Why are you dirty?"

"What? Oh, that. Uh, I just fell at recess."

Dustin rolls his eyes at Mike's poor attempt to not seem like a complete loser in front of his crush. Mike and Eleven are walking a few feet ahead of him and Lucas, and it's not like he's trying to eavesdrop or anything; it's just that Eleven is a much more receptive audience for Mike than Lucas is for him. "I'm telling you, I'm almost 100% sure that I'm the one with the time-manipulation powers and Mike is somehow copying them."

As expected, Lucas rolls his eyes. "Where's your proof?"

"Uh, have you seen Mike freeze time when I'm not around?" Dustin counters, his eyebrows lifting under his fringe as if to emphasize his pointing out an obvious fact.

"No, but I haven't seen you do it when he's not around, either," Lucas retorts with a shake of his head. Dustin has to admit he has a point, but that's not his fault either; it's the nature of the powers that the people who are frozen in time can't see what the person *freezing* time is doing.

If only he could find a way to leave his friends unaffected while freezing everything around them, like Mike did that first time... Maybe it was the sense of impending danger that did it; that was the only explanation he could think of. Whatever the reason is, it merits more experimentation.

In the meantime, there's not much he can do about his friends' skepticism. "Whatever. I rewound time earlier today. I saved Mike from splitting his chin open against a rock! I'm a freaking hero!" He shakes his head. "Why can't you just believe me? Why do you have to be such a jerk?"

Lucas glares at him. "Oh, so I should believe you like the time you said there was a monster in your closet and it turned out to be *your*

own cat?"

"I was nine and I had just seen *Alien*!" Dustin throws back, feeling the need to remind his friend that they had all been scaredy cats back then. "Besides, now we *know* that monsters actually exist, so you can't use that one against me anymore."

"We don't *know* that monsters exist," Lucas points out. "We're just taking the weirdo's word for it because Mike's sweet on her. For all we know, she's just making it up, like with the powers. Seriously, we're just wasting a bunch of time we should be using looking for Will."

Dustin stares at him with a befuddled expression. "You've seen her use her powers. She's not making up her powers! And neither am I, by the way." He sniffs, pretending to be offended. "You're just jealous."

Lucas scoffs. "Jealous of what? And I know her powers are real," he clarifies, probably only admitting it because he'd seen her use them with his own eyes. "What I'm saying is that we don't know what all powers she actually has. Maybe her freaky mind powers are causing *your* freaky time powers. Have you ever thought about that possibility, huh?"

"She said it wasn't her!" Dustin retorts, then looks away from Lucas to focus on the twosome walking in front of them. "Hey, Eleven? You're sure you're not the one doing the time-freezing, right?"

She and Mike are so busy making goo-goo eyes at each other that Dustin's sudden question startles her a little, so it takes her a moment to look at him over her shoulder and shake her head. "See?" Dustin says as he turns back to Lucas, who looks up in response, like he's praying to Heaven for patience. Dustin snickers. "You're just jealous we have powers and you don't."

"Yeah. Sure. That's it." Lucas lets out a huff and pulls his bike closer, starting to walk faster as if to catch up with Mike. When he makes it to his other friend's side, however, all he says is "Let me know if we have to turn somewhere," before walking past him as well. Dustin shakes his head. Let him walk alone for a while if he wants to; he'll

get over it soon enough.

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"God. I-I *need* you to believe me. Please," Joyce begs. "*Please.*"

Hopper's mind remains frustratingly blank.

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His mother sends him up to his room to sleep the tears off, but despite the natural exhaustion that came from crying so much, Mike can't stay asleep for long. Mainly because he's so angry about everything that happened, but also because whenever he does manage to nod off, he dreams about Eleven— the dreams he's been having for a few days now, where she has long blond hair and is wearing a pink dress— and that only makes him angrier.

So he goes down to the basement hoping to find something that will get his mind off of it. He knows Eleven is down there— he saw through his bedroom window earlier when Dustin dropped her off— but he is determined to ignore her presence as best as he can. It's not hard since she barely even speaks.

He's browsing through some of Will's old drawings of their D&D characters using their powers when the idea comes to him: why can't he use *his* superpower to make this better? They'd been too late to save Will, but who's to say that was the end of it?

According to Dustin, he'd managed to rewind time earlier at recess. Surely that meant Mike could go back to a point before he believed El's lies, or before he decided to help her. Clearly that had been a mistake. Or he could even go back to the night Will went missing, and make sure he got home alright.

Save the lost child, save the world, right? There's no need to save Will if he never disappears.

He puts Will's drawings to the side and closes his eyes, trying to focus hard like Dustin said he should. When he opens his eyes again, he's still in his basement, El tinkering with his Supercomm over in her blanket fort. He holds back a frustrated huff.

So he tries again. And again. And again. After seven or eight failed attempts he's borderline fuming, and wondering if he's doing something wrong. Maybe the powers only activate in moments when there's some kind of imminent trouble, like Dustin had suggested. Maybe you need to be really, really desperate for them to work. For a moment Mike is almost willing to go upstairs and tell his mother that he's hiding a girl in the basement to see if his mom's anger would do the trick, but immediately he pulls back, knowing that he would be in deep shit if his genius idea fails.

Maybe he just isn't focusing enough. It's too easy to get distracted by the staticky sounds coming from the walkie-talkie in Eleven's hands.

Angry all over again, he turns to look at her directly for the first time since he'd come down to the basement. "Can you please stop that?" he asks, a demand in tone if not in wording. She doesn't answer, concentrating on the Supercomm as she is. It only annoys him more. "Are you deaf?"

As upset and impotent as he feels, he just *unloads* on her, telling her he should never have thought she was the lost child they had to save, how he'd been wrong about her from the beginning and how much her lies had hurt him. She doesn't say anything, only looks up at him with pain-filled eyes which he tries to not pay attention to.

But then Will's voice comes through the walkie, and it's like someone managed to reset time without even trying: in the blink of an eye, he's once again absolutely certain that whatever is going on, whoever the "lost child" is, Eleven is going to play a huge part in solving the puzzle.

As he looks from the Supercomm, now in his hands, to Eleven, who's giving him a weak smile punctuated by the blood flowing from her

nose, he immediately feels terrible. How could he have ever thought that maybe it was better not to help her? Even if she *wasn't* the lost child in question, she was in trouble herself, and everybody deserved help. It wasn't her fault that Will just happened to disappear on the same day she wound up lost in the forest, right?

Thinking back on everything that happened, details started to stand out to him, such as Eleven knowing where Will lived without ever having been there. He and the boys had been tired and cranky, and hadn't stopped to think that there was no way she could've known where Will lived before throwing her help back in her face. How could he have been such a big jerk? He should've known she wouldn't lead them on a wild goose chase. Why would she do that? She's trying to help them, even though she doesn't have to. She doesn't even know Will, but she wants to save him just as much as any of them did. He knows she does.

"I'm sorry," he blurts out, feeling his cheeks heat up as she looks up at him with those big brown eyes of hers. "I shouldn't have said all those things I said before. We *are* friends. I shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. I should've let you explain, and I didn't. That was wrong."

He purses his lips for a moment before looking down at his hands. "You're not a liar. You're... you're important to m— to us. Can you... can you forgive me?" He looks up at her with a bit of a wince, bracing himself for a rebuke, but she's smiling again, a little bit more energetic this time, and when their eyes meet, she nods.

Mike's heart starts beating a mile a minute, almost defying space-time itself, and he decides right then and there that being able to make El smile was a bigger rush than any superpower he could ever have.

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"Okay, let me get this straight. Will, that's not his body, because he's in the lights, right? And there's a monster in the wall? Do you even

hear yourself?"

"I know it sounds crazy," Joyce retorts straight away. "I sound crazy! You think I don't know that? It is crazy!"

Joyce knows, she knows that Jonathan has a point— if this had been anyone else, she would've marched them straight to Pennhurst. He thinks she's having a breakdown, that Will's supposed death has destroyed her sanity, and to be honest, maybe it has. Maybe she is going insane, but if she is, she's going down fighting.

"But I heard him, Jonathan," she pleads. "He talked to me! Will is— is calling to me! I don't know why I'm the only one who can hear him, I can't explain it. But he's out there, and he's alone, and he's scared, and I-I don't care if anyone believes me! I am not gonna stop looking for him until I find him and bring him home," she declares, incensed. "I am going to bring him home!"

She spins around on her heel, ignoring Jonathan's bellows from behind her. She knows she's hurting him, but Will's wellbeing is her priority at the moment. She doesn't know why she's been given this ability; she couldn't even pinpoint when it had started, but that meant she can't know when it will fade. And if this weird mind-reading power is the only thing still connecting her to her son, she can't afford to let it go to waste.

Whether Jonathan finds it in him to support her or not, she's going to follow that link back to Will, whatever it takes.

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When Eleven comes out of Nancy's room all dressed up, Mike's breath catches in his throat for several reasons.

First, because she looks so pretty. Not that she doesn't *always* look pretty, he would begrudgingly admit to himself later on while remembering how she giggled when he showed her his dad's La-Z-Boy or how she smiled at him when she found Will with the

Supercomm. It wasn't like the wig and the dress turned her into a different person or anything, but there's something about the way she carries herself now, a kind of brightness coming from inside her that hadn't quite been there before, and he finds himself drawn to it like a moth to a flame. Everybody can tell that's what he's thinking, too, mainly because he blurts it out like a wastoid.

(He can hear Dustin snickering behind him, and knows he's never going to live this down, even after his lame attempt to "fix" it.)

When she moves to look at herself in the mirror, Mike takes a moment to ponder the second reason why he was so stupefied when she walked out: She looks exactly like she did in his dreams.

When he told Dustin and Lucas to go down to the basement and browse through his mother's Goodwill boxes for something for El to wear, he didn't even remember they had any of that stuff down there; he thought they'd gotten rid of Nancy's old Halloween wigs ages ago, and he can't even remember her ever owning that dress. But here El stands, looking like she stepped out of his reveries, and he has no idea what it means.

Has he been dreaming about the future? He already thought something weird was going on when they found Eleven in the forest and he realized he had dreamed about her, but he has seen the exact moment she walked out the door in his dreams, down to the smallest detail of the way she looks. That can't be a coincidence. Does it have something to do with the time-manipulation powers? But he hasn't been able to freeze or rewind time since that one and only time, so how is it possible that he's flashing forward in time in his dreams?

And he's also reminded of Will's drawing that Mike saw the night he disappeared. Eleven looked completely different in the drawing, but Mike is certain that it's her. Is that also something that's going to happen eventually? Can Will draw the future? And does that mean Eleven will stay around for a while longer?

Looking at her as she looks at herself in the mirror, he really hopes she does.

"We really have to go now," he says as she stands there almost

subconsciously touching the ends of her blond wig. "Are you ready?" he asks her softly.

She stares into the mirror for a heartbeat longer, almost sighing at her reflection, before turning to him with a brilliant smile. "Yes," she says, and Mike feels his heart going pitter-patter as the four of them walk down the stairs and out the door.

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Hopper bends down to grab the man's keycard, but as he straightens up to open the door, he doesn't see the statie's hand and accidentally trips over it. He lifts up his hands to support himself against the wall but never quite finds it, so he barely manages to keep himself upright, bending his knees to keep himself from falling face down on the floor.

Thankfully no one's around to see his stumble... mainly because he's not even out in the hallway anymore.

As he looks around the freezer room he wonders how the hell he got in there, because the door is still locked and the keycard remains in his hand, unused. But lo and behold he's on the opposite side of the wall he'd been in just a second ago, almost like... almost like he had gone *through* the wall.

But that's ridiculous, right? He must've opened the door with the keycard and just blanked out somehow. Damn. That's what he gets for mixing pills and alcohol.

He has no time to wonder what the hell is going on with his mind. He needs to do what he came here to do, and he needs to do it quick. So he drops the damn keycard and turns to pull out the drawer containing Will's body, hoping against hope that there was something there, and he wasn't just going insane.

Later, when he makes his way to the lab, he brings his boltcutter with him to cut a hole in the fencing. When he's standing right beside it,

though, he remembers the weirdness at the morgue, and a thought occurs to him. He touches his hand against the chain-link fence and pushes.

And his hand goes right through.

He stares, dumbfounded, at the pieces of metal wire sticking out of his wrist, or technically speaking, at his wrist sticking *into* the metal wire. It should feel weird, but it doesn't— it doesn't feel like anything, really; it's like he's pushing his hand through air— and he can't stop looking between the fence and the unused boltcutter in his other hand.

But Jim Hopper is nothing if not a pragmatist, and he knows he cannot stand there gawking forever; sooner or later someone, a guard or similar, is going to come by and catch him trying to break in, and then he's *really* going to be in deep shit. Needless to say, the Chief of Police getting caught breaking and entering would *not* be an easy thing to explain away.

He quickly throws the boltcutter back in the trunk of the Blazer and, making sure there's no one around, approaches the fence again. Seems like he isn't going to need any tools to make his way in, after all.

The phasing thing comes in handy again when he has to make it in the front door; he has to wait until two lab workers make their way out so he's not spotted, and he's not fast enough to grab the door before it closes behind them, but he can walk right through the glass, so that's not an issue. Similarly when he's walking down the hallways of the place and people came along, he could jump straight into the wall right beside him and stay out of sight.

He doesn't know what he's looking for until he comes across a room with a small bed, a plush toy in the shape of a lion, and a little kid's drawing taped to the wall, showing two figures, one with two straight lines above its head ("LL"?) and the other labeled "Papa." That's when he decides Will has to be *somewhere* in this building, and he's going to find him if it takes him his last breath.

His first real obstacle is the door to the elevator, which seems to have

keycard security. The door itself is not the issue— he can get past that in a second— but he doesn't even know if the elevator car is on the other side of the door at the moment, and even if it is, he's pretty sure he wouldn't be able to operate the thing without a keycard anyway.

He's just pondering what to do when he's approached from behind by the lab's head of Security and a guard, both of them brandishing guns at him. "Hands up. Hands up!" the head of Security demands, and Hopper complies, knowing he's serious. "Forgot all the cameras, bub?"

"Look, Dr. Brenner asked for me specifically," Hopper tries to play it off like he's supposed to be there for some actual reason. "Okay? How else do you think I got in here?" he asks with a scoff, praying they'll take the bluff.

He must be a better actor than he thinks because the man cocks his head to the side as if unsure. "What's your name again?" Hopper tells him his name (and title!) and the man narrows his eyes at him. "If you move one finger, I'll shoot you."

"You can try," Hopper mutters under his breath but otherwise remains with his hands raised as the man pulls his walkie-talkie off his belt to transmit the facts of his presence to the higher-ups.

That's when Hopper sees his chance. He knocks out the head of security as he's speaking into his walkie, and turns around just in time to catch the other security guard aiming his gun and pulling the trigger. The bullet flies right through his gut— and by through he means *through*, not a sign of damage to his body, not even a tiny twinge of pain— to embed itself on the wall behind him with a blunt sound.

The security guard is so baffled by what just happened that he makes it entirely too easy for Hopper to punch him in the face, proceeding to take a gun and the keycard he needed from the slumped down figures and making his way to the elevator just in time for a slew of more security guards *not* to catch him.

What he finds downstairs almost makes him wish he hadn't decided to come down at all.

He's standing there partly because he doesn't even understand what he's seeing— whatever it is, it looks gross and like it came out of a science fiction movie, and Hopper hasn't seen very many of those— when he hears something behind him. He turns around quickly to see a figure making its way just out of his field of vision and he can't pinpoint what it is, but he's suddenly thinking back to Joyce's descriptions of a humanoid creature without a face.

He looks to the opposite side, hoping to catch whatever it was in his gaze, when he's confronted by a person wearing a white hazmat suit. Whoever it is tries to grab at him, and he quickly steps back through the person's arms, once again using the bewildered reaction to punch them out. But he realizes only too late that there's another hazmat-wearing guy behind him, and isn't fast enough to phase when he finds a syringe embedded in his neck.

The man's mask is the last thing he sees before he falls to the ground and everything goes dark.

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Notes: Eh. I just wanted them to have superpowers. _(·v·)_/

Sorry I was AWOL for so long; I've been writing pretty consistently, but as you might imagine, in order to write this I needed to rewatch the entire first season again one episode at a time, and between the World Cup and real life, that actually took me longer than you might think. But now I've only got to finish the bits from the last episode of season 1, though, so hopefully I'll have part 2 ready sometime next week before I go on holiday. Keep your fingers crossed!

In case you can't tell, this story is pretty directly inspired by the 2006 NBC TV show *Heroes* (or, well, at least the first season, since that's when that show peaked, lol). Most of the powers here are written to correspond to those of *Heroes*' main characters, so that's kinda fun to think about. Be sure to comment with any speculation you come up with about any unexplained powers/weirdness presented here! I'm curious to see if anyone's starting to put two and two together when

it comes to certain details. FYI, I try to post snippets of this fic as I write on my Tumblr on Fridays, so if you'd like to read some of what's coming up in the future (and/or just want to make sure I'm not dead), be sure to check there.

2. Chapter 2

The Savior. PG-13, general/sci-fi, canon pairings.

"Save the lost child, save the world." Initially, Mike thinks future!Dustin was talking about Will. But then he and his friends find a telekinetic girl wandering around the forest on a rainy night, and now he isn't so sure.

Note: This will mostly follow the plot of the TV show with some very specific changes. Any scene from the show you don't see here, it's because it happens more or less the same as it did on the show.

Note 2: I want to dedicate this one to **Genesis Malfoy** over at FFN, because she's probably very close to bringing a brand-new tiny human into the world and that's pretty damn heroic in and of itself. Good luck, my friend! Here's hoping the kid is born with superpowers — but only the cool ones, lol. ;)

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"A plane out of phase," Dustin states, dramatically reading the description of the Vale of Shadows off his patched-together copy of the Dungeons & Dragons Expert Rules Set 2. "A place of monsters. It is right next to you, and you don't even see it."

"An alternate dimension," Mike summarizes helpfully.

"But how do we get there?" Lucas asks, always the practical one.

"You cast Shadow Walk," Dustin answers immediately, always the readiest when it came to remembering arcane rules of the game.

Lucas rolls his eyes. "In real life, dummy."

They quiet down for a moment as they think of a possible answer, but Mike is the only one who comes up with an idea, albeit a far-fetched one. "Dustin, do you think you could maybe teleport yourself there?" he suggests excitedly.

"Why would I be able to teleport myself to the Upside Down?" Dustin retorts, confused.

"You said you think you can alter the space-time continuum, right?" Mike prompts. "So, *space* is a part of it. If you can control space, that means you should be able to teleport to different places."

"We don't *actually* know that he can alter the space-time continuum, though," Lucas points out with a shake of his head. "We're just assuming he does. We don't know what the rules are."

"Yeah, if you think it's that easy, why don't you try it yourself?" Dustin throws back at Mike, given that they seemed to share their time-manipulation powers.

"I can't," Mike replies with a groan. "I told you, I haven't been able to manipulate time again since that first time I did it in my bedroom."

"Because you're just copying *my* powers!" Dustin returns triumphantly, like that was all he needed for his theory to be proven correct.

Now it was Mike's turn to roll his eyes. "Sure, whatever. The point is, if you can't do it, I can't do it. So what do we do?" Looking for a solution, he grabs hold of Dustin's manual, pulls it over to his side of the table and turns it around so he can read.

"Well, we can't shadow walk," Dustin starts, "but maybe she can." With a nod of his head he signals past his two friends toward Eleven, who's lying down on the couch, still wearing her pink dress and her blond wig.

Mike and Lucas turn to look at Eleven, too, and she seems nervous about suddenly being in the spotlight. Mike asks her if she knows how to get to the Upside Down and, without words, she answers in the negative. "Great," Lucas laments. "What do we do now?"

"We need to ask someone who knows more about alternate dimensions than we do," Mike posits.

"Like who?" Lucas asks.

Dustin gives them both a toothless grin. "I know who we can ask."

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Hopper wakes up with a jolt the next morning, and it takes him a second or two to realize that he's no longer in the lab— instead, he's on his couch in his trailer. He doesn't know how he got there, so he can only assume the lab assholes dumped him here after drugging him.

After everything he saw last night, he's lucky to be alive. Why hadn't they killed him?

Still feeling some aftereffects of whatever drug it was they doped him with, he makes his way to the bathroom to wash the grogginess off his face. As he stands there looking at himself in the mirror and inspecting the barely-visible needle mark they left on the side of his neck, he catches sight of the beer can that is still embedded in his bathroom sink.

He looks at it skeptically for a moment before reaching out to grab hold of the top ring of the can. He shakes off the prickle of foolishness that momentarily creeps up and inhales deeply before pulling the can upward. It comes out intact. So is the laminate top of the sink, which doesn't have any holes or nicks, or anything to remotely show that something had been forcefully embedded into it just a minute ago.

So he hadn't just dreamed the whole phasing thing, then.

As he examines the can, though, a thought occurs to him: just because pranksters hadn't broken into his trailer like he once thought, didn't mean *no one* had. He'd woken up on his couch, after all.

Immediately fully awake, he looks up at the lamp above his bathroom mirror. He stares at it for a heartbeat before hurrying to unscrew the glass shade, looking for bugs. He needed to check every nook and cranny of his trailer, and he needed to do it right now.

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At Hawkins National Laboratory, Dr. Martin Brenner watches a TV screen over the shoulder of his head of Security. There are several in the room they're all in, but he's only focused on one in particular.

"Show me camera 3 again," he orders, and his head of Security complies. He watches for a few seconds before calling out, "Change to 2 now." His head of Security presses a button on his keyboard and the feed switches to a different angle. "Slow it down."

He leans forward and narrows his eyes, trying to take in the details out of the security camera video. It was hard to see, but as far as he could tell, the bullet had indeed gone right through the police chief's abdomen, then proceeding to embed itself against the wall behind him.

But there is no visible impact on the man's body, at least not as far as they can tell from the video. They hadn't found any blood out in the hallway. When they'd checked the chief for injuries the night before, they had found none.

The quality of the security footage was poor, and the two would-be witnesses had sustained concussions either from the knocks to the head or from the fall right after. A man being able to become intangible at will? Any scientist in their right mind would've thought it's impossible.

Martin Brenner is not in the habit of thinking anything is impossible.

"Delete the tapes," he orders, knowing his staff has more than enough experience with such a procedure. His head of Security nods. "Your priority remains subject 011," he instructs further. "I'll deal with this myself."

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"I went to the quarry on the way over here. I just wanted to look around, you know? Couldn't believe it." Joyce just stares at Lonnie, confused, wondering why he's suddenly talking about the Sattler Company completely out of the blue. What does that have to do with Will or the lights?

"I just couldn't believe it," he repeats. "No warning signs, no fence, no nothing," he adds as he realigns the plank of wood he's placing against the wall. "Ought to be held accountable if you ask me."

Millions of dollars, probably, Joyce hears as he starts to hammer again. How much is a wrongful death lawsuit going for these days? At least a million, surely. And since Will's a kid and all, might be able to milk it for even more. Judge's bound to feel for the grieving parents.

Joyce feels the pit of her stomach freeze over as she stands there, listening to the words he isn't saying with his voice. She should've known; she should've known there was more to Lonnie's— what had he just called it?— "grieving father" routine than a genuine sadness for their son's disappearance and apparent death.

He had never cared about Will. He'd never cared about Jonathan, and he'd long ago stopped caring about *her*, if he ever had. All Lonnie cares about is himself, and no family tragedy is going to change that. And Joyce isn't having it anymore.

"All right, that's that," he says eventually, as he finishes patching up the hole on the wall. Dropping the hammer on the floor by the toolbox and the box of nails, he turns to her with a sigh. "I'm all covered in soot from the shed now. I'm gonna take a shower, okay?" he declares and walks around her toward the back of the house. Joyce remains quiet, watching him as he goes.

As soon as he's out of sight, she makes a dive for his bag, which he left lying on the couch by the window.

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"She used us, all of us!" Lucas is screaming, the anger obvious in his tense expression as he stared down his supposed friend. "She helped just enough so she could get what she wants: Food and a bed. She's like a stray dog."

"Screw you, Lucas!" Mike retorts, furious on El's behalf. Who did Lucas think he was? El had been wandering in the forest, on her own, in the middle of the night, in a storm, wearing only a large t-shirt. She hadn't even been wearing shoes! She was clearly in trouble, and she needed help. You don't offer to help someone in need for what they could do for you; you help because they are human beings and they deserve compassion, and El deserved their compassion and their help.

So what if she couldn't take them exactly to where Will was? So what if she'd led them down the wrong path this once because she was afraid they were going somewhere dangerous? She'd still done more for their search than they ever would've pulled off on their own. She wanted to help them. She was key to this mission. Why couldn't Lucas see that?

"No! Screw *you*, Mike. You're blind," the dark-skinned boy retorts forcefully. "You're blind because you think she's the 'lost child' or whatever."

"Well, maybe she is!" Mike throws back just as forcefully.

Lucas isn't having it. "But she's *not*! She's right here! Will is the one who's lost, and just because you like that there's one girl in the world who's not grossed out by you, you're choosing her over him!"

"That's *not* true—" Mike tries to interject, but Lucas is on a roll.

"Wake up, man!" he barks out, getting all up on Mike's face. "Wake the hell up! She knows where Will is, and now she's just letting him die in the Upside Down."

"Shut up!" Mike isn't going to let him talk like that about Eleven. She's their best shot at finding Will, and he's going to make Lucas see

that one way or the other.

"For all we know, it's her fault."

"*Shut up!*"

"We're looking for some stupid monster," Lucas continues, his tone incisive, "but did you ever stop to think... that maybe *she's* the monster?"

He points in Eleven's direction, and she looks so devastated that Mike can't hold himself back anymore. "I said *shut up!*" he growls, and before he really knows what he's doing, he takes a swing at Lucas. Next thing he knows, they're both rolling around on the ground throwing punches.

Mike can barely hear his friends screaming at them to stop over the sound of his own heart beating in his ears, and he's pretty sure Lucas is going to get one up on him if they keep going at this, but his righteous anger will not let him quit as he continues trying to land hits as best as he can.

And then, suddenly, Lucas's weight is off him, an unseen force pushing his friend off of him and off to the side nearly ten feet away. Except, when Mike gathers his bearings and manages to look in that direction, he sees that instead of hitting what looked like an aluminum roof panel propped up against the trunk of a tree, Lucas is a few feet in front of it, and he appears to be... floating about a foot in the air.

Mike's first thought is to turn to Dustin. "Are you doing this?" he asks, but as soon as the question leaves his lips he realizes this looks different than that one time they froze time; Lucas is suspended by nothing, that's true, but he's still moving— he's blinking and his jaw is slack and he's running his arms through the empty space beneath his legs as if looking for some measure of support. On top of that, he's ever-so-slightly bobbing up and down, as if he were floating on a dense, wavy liquid.

Dustin shakes his head, his eyes as wide as Mike himself feels his are. "Are *you* doing this?" Mike shakes his head, and in uncanny unison

they both turn toward Eleven. She shakes her head as well.

Just as the three of them turn to look at Lucas again, whatever was holding him up in the air seems to disappear, and he drops a foot or so down to the ground, falling squarely on his butt.

Mike and Dustin make their way to his side immediately. "Are you okay?" Mike asks, wanting to make sure he hadn't hit anything on the way that might've hurt him.

"How did you do that?" Dustin asks instead.

"Get off me," Lucas grunts, slapping his friends' hands away from him before pushing himself to his feet and dusting himself off. "I'm not talking to either of you anymore." He signaled behind them with a nod of his head. "At least not until you stop hanging out with *her*."

"You can't do that!" Mike exclaims right away, planting himself directly in front of Lucas so he can't take a step forward. "Party rules! If you want to exclude someone from the party, we have to take a vote—"

"Well, technically we never took a vote to *include* her," Dustin points out smartly.

Lucas shakes his head and takes a step closer to Mike, staring him down. "Read my lips, Mike: *I don't care*." He scoffs. "You wanna stay with her? Fine. I'm going to find Will with or without you. Now get out of my way."

He pushes Mike back, and Mike stumbles, windmilling his arms as if looking for something to hold onto, but there's nothing around him he can support himself against. So he falls back, but before he can hit the ground he feels his fall cushioned by something, and when he looks down he realizes he's floating a couple of inches off the ground, much like Lucas had.

"You're flying, too!" Dustin exclaims, a massive grin drawing on his face.

"I'm flying, too!" Mike exclaims, matching his enthusiasm. He turns to look at Lucas. "Are you doing this?" he asks, wondering if maybe

Lucas had powers like Eleven's. If she could push Lucas off him earlier, then surely her powers would allow her to make a person fly. Maybe Lucas had telekinesis, too.

But Lucas just shakes his head with a grunt. "Whatever, man." He walks a few steps away from them and crouches lightly, like he's about to jump. But he doesn't jump; instead he shoots straight up hundreds of feet in the air. *Like freaking Superman.*

"Holy shit, are you seeing this?" Dustin asks, but Mike only manages to keep his eyes on Lucas's disappearing form for a moment before he, too, drops to the ground on his fanny.

"Ow," he moans momentarily, not expecting just a couple of inches of falling to hit that hard. But regardless, he pushes himself to his feet, looking at the little dot near the horizon that he knew to be his so-called friend. "Lucas, come on!" he yells out, but Lucas is probably too far away to hear him.

"Let him go," Dustin cautions wisely. "I mean, he does have a point," he conceded. "Eleven could've killed him."

"Don't *you* start now," Mike retorts with a frown. "You know she was only trying to help. And who cares, anyway?" He shakes his head. "Did you not see what just happened? I can fly!"

"No, *he* can fly," Dustin corrects, pointing in the direction Lucas just disappeared. "*You* are probably just copying his powers." He grins. "See? It's like I've been saying all along!"

"How do you know I don't just have two powers?" Mike throws back, unwilling to admit that Lucas was the one with the cool superpower.

"Well, try and fly now that he's gone, then," Dustin dares him, and Mike *has* to at least try. He crouches like he'd seen Lucas do earlier, and tries to push himself off the ground, but all he manages is a feeble jump before gravity pulls him straight back down.

He tries again and fails again. On his third try he somehow trips and ends up sprawled butt-first on the ground again. Dustin grins. "See?" he says, signaling to Mike's form on the ground as if it proved his

theory entirely correct.

"Fine, you were right," Mike begrudgingly grumbles under his breath as he pushes himself to his feet, having to wipe the dust off his jeans all over again. "But then how come I can't copy Eleven's..." His voice trails off as he turns around to look at the girl and realizes she's nowhere to be seen. "...Where's El?"

"Oh no," Dustin says, but before he can turn to look around the junkyard, Mike is already calling out for Eleven, hoping that wherever she's gone she can still hear him and come back. He'll never forgive Lucas if something happens to El because of his big mouth.

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Jonathan doesn't notice it as it's happening, busy as he is with trying to pull Nancy out of whatever hell she's seemingly stuck in. He grabs the hand she's managed to push through the hole, pushes his feet against the trunk of the tree for leverage and *pulls*, the vine-covered portal finally giving way as Nancy's entire body makes its way out, covered in some kind of disgusting goo but otherwise unharmed.

It's only minutes later, as he wraps her in his arms and whispers gentle words of comfort into her ear, that he notices: over her shoulder, he can see that not only is the portal gone, but it is gone because the entire trunk of the tree is split in half, like a tremor had run through it from the base to the top.

"I think that was you," Nancy tells him the next morning when he wakes up and finds her poring over a biology textbook.

"You think I split the tree in half?" Jonathan asks, because it sounds ludicrous to his ears, but then again, it sounds better than "the magic portal just closed on its own." What other explanation could there be?

Nancy nods. "When you were trying to pull me out you pushed against the tree with your feet. But it would take incredible force for that to split the tree apart." She looks up at him with those big blue

eyes of hers. "Have you noticed anything different lately? About yourself, I mean."

"Maybe." He had, but he hadn't thought it strange back then. It's only recently that he's started to realize something's off— like how the driver's side door of his car seems to be looser than usual, or how Lonnie had kept complaining about back pain the entire time he was in Hawkins for Will's funeral. So he knows something weird's going on, but he doesn't know what, exactly. "But why would that place have anything to do with me?"

"I don't know," Nancy admits, "but I think... sometimes when extraneous creatures arrive at a specific location, they cause the entire ecosystem around them to change in order to adapt," she explained, passing the pages of her book back and forth as if looking for something.

"And you think the fact that this creature is around is making people... is making *me*... super strong?" he asks, following her theory just enough to start feeling like pieces were falling into place.

"Maybe," she says, shaking her head. "Or maybe it's just something in the water. I don't know. All I know is it can't be a coincidence. Just like it's not a coincidence that this creature happens to be around right when Will and Barbara disappeared." She keeps passing pages. "Wherever I was... that place... I think that it lives there. It was feeding there. Feeding on that deer." She noticeably shivers.

"That means if..." She takes a deep breath as if steeling herself for what she's about to say. "...If Will and Barbara..."

"Hey," he interrupts her, "my mom said she talked to Will. If he's alive, there's a chance Barbara is, too," he adds, trying to say something, anything, to make her feel better. He knows she blames herself for what happened to Barb, and she shouldn't.

She seems to buy that, but the wariness in her eyes doesn't go away. "That means she's trapped in that place," she says, still worried. But there's a determination in her tone come her next sentence. "We have to find it again."

"You wanna go back out there?" he asks, already knowing that he will go back there with her no matter what.

"Maybe we don't have to." She looks at him, jaw tense, and explains what he thinks is the best and worst plan he's ever heard in his life. But it's the only option they have if they want to do anything to help Will and Barbara, so they're going with it. Now all they need is some supplies.

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Dustin and Mike watch warily as Lucas paces in front of them, to the point that they're a little startled when he stops and speaks for the first time since he let them in. "Okay, I'll shake," he concedes magnanimously.

Mike smiles, relieved, and stretches a hand out for the peace gesture. But then Lucas unexpectedly continues speaking. "On one condition," he says. "I want Mike to admit that the weirdo isn't the lost child."

Mike frowns and pulls back his hand. "You don't know that," he counters straight away, already starting to get angry all over again.

"Uh, yes, I do," Lucas retorts snottily. "Or do you not remember that she's been around all along while Will hasn't been seen in days? What kind of a lost child is she if she isn't even lost?"

"Well, she's lost *now*," Mike throws back harshly. "Thanks to *you*, by the way. We have no idea where she is, and she could be in danger! We *have* to find her as soon as possible, or do you want the world to be destroyed?"

"The world isn't going to be destroyed, because she's not the lost child!" Lucas insists, glaring at Mike. "Will is, and unless *you* want the world to end, we gotta forget about your little girlfriend and go straight to the gate."

"No. Deal's off," Mike declares, incensed—Dustin isn't sure if it's

because Lucas refuses to entertain the possibility that Eleven might be the lost child in question, or if it's just because he called her Mike's girlfriend and he's embarrassed, but the specificity is irrelevant at this point.

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

"No, no, not fine!" Dustin intervenes when they start to look like two rams about to butt heads. "Guys, seriously? Do you even remember what happened on the Bloodstone Pass?" Both boys look at him cluelessly, and he sighs. "We couldn't agree on what path to take, so we split up the party and those trolls took us out one by one. And it all went to shit. And we were all disabled!"

He glares at his two stubborn, knuckleheaded best friends, almost wishing he could cram into their heads that splitting up was never a good idea. Son of a bitch, they should know this stuff by now! Dustin doesn't know who the lost child really is, but it's one of the two, and that means they have to find both. It's that simple. "So we stick together, no matter what!"

Unfortunately for him, as intense as his motivational speech had been, it doesn't work. Lucas can't forgive the fact that Eleven had almost hurt him, and Mike can't convince him that Eleven could be useful for their search. On top of that, Eleven isn't even around to explain herself, so it's all a big mess.

As they leave Lucas's house empty-handed, the mythical handshake of peace is even further away than it was when they first came over.

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Jonathan and Nancy realize that her theory about his super strength is correct when he almost kills Tommy H. just by shoving him off.

It's by sheer willpower that he doesn't kill Steve— a part of him

wanted to— but another part of his mind is actively making him pull his punches, knowing that he needs to shut him up but not being the kind of person to want to cause any permanent damage. He's so focused on controlling his blows, though, that he doesn't expect Tommy H. to suddenly attempt to throw him off his friend, and when he pushes him off without even looking at him, Tommy flies ten feet back and slams *hard* against a garbage disposal container.

Carol screeches, "Tommy!" and then he hears her and Nicole and Nancy rush over to Tommy, who's apparently unconscious. Jonathan tries to stop punching to look in their direction, figure out what's happening, but Steve won't stop fighting, still attempting to land at least as many hits as he got. His attempts were failing.

Jonathan grabs him by the arms and pins him down forcefully, but his newfound strength means he isn't even breaking a sweat despite Steve's struggling. Unfortunately for him, before he could give Steve a piece of his mind instead of letting his fists do the talking, they hear sirens. The thunderous slam of Tommy H.'s back against the trash container must've alerted the police that some disturbance was taking place in the alleyway.

"Cops!" Nicole screams as the revolving lights of the police cruisers start to become visible. "We have to go!"

"What about Tommy?!" Carol asks, concerned about her boyfriend, who was still unresponsive.

"They'll take him to the hospital! We have to go!" Nicole replies, and without giving it any more consideration, the two of them take off running toward the back of the alleyway and away from the police cruisers now making their way to them.

"Where are you going? You can't just leave them here!" Nancy calls out at their retreating forms at the same time Jonathan says, "Nancy! Let's go!" but before he can even move, Officer Callahan is pulling him off Steve, who is in turn being pulled to his feet by Officer Powell. It's a small miracle that Callahan doesn't suffer the same fate as Tommy H. when Jonathan automatically struggles in his grasp.

Thankfully, he manages to pull back just enough that this time his

attempt at pushing someone off doesn't get anyone hurt, though it does get him arrested on charges of assaulting a police officer. Nancy's crying— whether in fear or frustration Jonathan doesn't know— as she kneels down to take Tommy's pulse.

Tommy and Steve, who's bruised so bad one of his eyes is nearly swollen shut, are loaded into one of the cruisers and taken to the nearest hospital while Jonathan and Nancy are pushed into another and transported to the police station for booking. Jonathan won't know what happens to Tommy H. until days later, when it becomes obvious that Steve isn't going to be hanging out with him and Carol any longer.

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This flying thing really comes in handy, Lucas thinks as he circles over Hawkins Lab from the sky. He's mostly trying to keep to above the trees, because it's hard to fly and use his binoculars at the same time and the trees give him something to hang on to in case he falls, but also because he doesn't want to be out in the open in case someone at the lab just happens to look up.

But then he catches sight of a large group of people exiting the building and heading toward a row of white vans parked near the entrance. Intrigued, he lowers himself to the top of a tall oak tree and looks through his binoculars, just in time to catch the sign on the side of the vans: HAWKINS POWER AND LIGHT.

He knew those vans. He'd seen them around his neighborhood.

Around Mike's house.

He quickly latches his binoculars onto his utility belt and pushes himself off the tree in the direction of the corner where he'd stashed his bike. Mike was right: El is in danger, and now so are his friends. He needs to warn them, and quick.

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"Dentist's office opens in five..."

Mike looks down at the water, his heart beating so hard he can hardly hear Troy's countdown, and knows without a doubt that if he jumps, he's never making it back up except in pieces.

"Four!"

Maybe if he uses Dustin's powers to freeze time. But Dustin is too far away now— they should've tried that earlier, but in their hurried attempt to run from Troy and James, it hadn't occurred to either of them— and even if Dustin manages to stop time in the middle of Mike's fall, how would he get back up to the ledge anyway? They'd never taken the time to figure out how or when exactly the powers worked, and now Mike wants to kick himself for that.

"Three!"

If only Lucas were here, Mike could tap into his flying power, or he could catch Mike himself. But Lucas wasn't around, and that was probably Mike's fault. He shouldn't have been so prideful; Lucas was just being protective, just like El had been. He should've tried harder to understand. *Dammit, Lucas*, he thinks, wishing his other best friend was here.

"Two!"

"Mike!" Dustin calls out, still begging him not to jump. But Mike can't risk it. He's not going to let Troy hurt his friend if there's anything he can do about it.

He can only hope that when he's gone, his friends will help El. They need her, and she needs them, too; they need each other if they want to save the world. Mike knows that in his soul. Dustin would take care of her in his absence, he felt. And Lucas would come around. And they would find Will, and everything would be okay. Everything... except Mike wouldn't be there.

"One!"

He lets himself fall.

And just as he's bracing himself for a painful impact with the water, he feels a harsh tug— suddenly his fall is broken by nothing but air as an invisible force keeps him hovering about halfway down the cliff. For a second he thinks Dustin managed to freeze time after all, but he can still feel the breeze on his face, and he starts flailing, unsure of what's happening or how long he can hold out for.

Then the same invisible force starts jerking him up toward the ledge, and he realizes something else is happening. He flies in an arc over the edge, over Troy and James and Dustin's heads, and then he feels the force give way and drop him to the ground with only a couple of feet to go (he can't help the "Ow!" that leaves his lips because, well, it hurt).

He looks around to see if he can spot who did this... and then he sees her.

She's walking toward them with thundering determination, her wig gone and her face and dress streaked with dirt, but there's a fire in her eyes that Mike can't look away from. She looks like an avenging angel, and that's when Mike knows this is it. *She* is it. *Save the lost child, save the world.* It has never been clearer than in this moment.

She makes quick work of Troy and James, and as they run off with their metaphorical tails between their legs, he hears Dustin yell after them, boasting about what she's going to do to them if they come after any of them again. But Mike only has eyes for El: her eyes are closing, and her stance is wavering, and a moment later she's falling, and Mike rushes to her side, heart in his throat.

"El? El! Come on, El," he begs as he tries to shake her awake, but it's for naught as it takes almost a full minute before she finally stirs. "El, are you okay?" he asks as he sees her adjust to her surroundings. "El?"

She looks up at him and her eyes widen, starting to well up with tears. "Mike..." she starts. "I'm sorry."

He doesn't understand at first. "Sorry? What are you sorry for?" he asks, almost with a scoff. It's silly to even think that she needs to apologize for anything; she'd just saved his life big time.

But she seems genuinely contrite despite his assurance to the contrary. "The gate," she explains, "I opened it." It starts to dawn on Mike what she meant. He still doesn't think she's at fault, but he can see why she'd feel guilty. "I'm the monster."

His heart aches for her and his arms itch to wrap around her shoulders. "No," he starts, his tone soft but assertive. Dustin stands beside them, listening quietly. "No, El, you're not the monster," he assures her. And when her eyes meet his, he smiles at her. "You're the savior."

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Years down the road, when someone asks Dustin what the most memorable moment of his life was, he'll point them to this exact moment.

Eyes wide and mouth wide open, he gets off his bike and around behind Lucas— whose face is frozen in an equally astonished expression— to look at the van floating above their heads from the opposite side. It looks like it is nosediving straight at them, the driver and his fellow bad man on the passenger-side seat looking down at him with terror in their eyes. Oops, wouldn't wanna be them right then.

He walks further, coming to stand right beside Mike's bike, and takes another look. He can see the entire undercarriage of the vehicle from an angle that very few people would ever see. "Man, I wish I had a Polaroid camera right now," he mumbles to himself as he stares, knowing no one's going to believe him when he tells them.

Just as he's going to walk around Mike and Eleven, he starts to feel a twinge of *something*, almost like the feeling in your stomach when

you're riding a rollercoaster and reaching the highest point of the ride, that breathless split second right before the car turns and you know you're about to go down the highest drop and your stomach feels like it wants to jump up into your throat.

He's never felt that before while having both feet planted firmly on the ground, so he immediately assumes it has something to do with his powers— specifically, that he'd been gawking way too long and his unintentional "pause button" was about to expire. He doesn't fancy the idea of being crushed by a ton plus of Hawkins Power and Light van while he stands there like an idiot, so he runs for his bike again and gets into pedaling position, then closes his eyes, focusing his thoughts on letting time move forward again.

He doesn't open his eyes again until he hears a massive crashing sound behind him; it's only then that he turns to look at the van— or what remains of it— on the ground, flipped upside down like a dead cockroach between them and the rest of the vans, effectively blocking them from catching the three bikes.

Lucas turns to look at Mike, who mirrors his astonished expression, before looking back at Dustin. Dustin can only grin in response. His powers might be vague and unreliable, and he definitely needed to study them more to get a hold of their proper usage, but it couldn't be denied that they were wicked cool.

"Did— did you see what she did to that van?!" he asks the others as they arrive at the junkyard, still in disbelief that he knew someone who could flip vans with her mind like they weighed about as much as tin cans.

Mike replies with a sarcastic quip, but Lucas agrees that it was awesome, and turns toward Eleven to apologize for being an ass. Dustin can't help but smile proudly as Lucas says, "I'm sorry. Look, I don't know if you're the lost child or not, but I know that you're important to the mission, and you're our friend."

Eleven apologizes for lying to them, and soon Mike is apologizing as well, just like Dustin told him he should. As Mike and Lucas shake hands, Dustin almost wants to freeze time again just to frame this moment for posterity, but they've got more important things to think

about right then. Namely, how to get to the gate.

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"Why is he wearing handcuffs?" Joyce demands first thing when she and Hopper walk into the police station to find Jonathan and Nancy sitting by Callahan's desk, quietly waiting.

"Well, your boy assaulted a police officer and sent two other kids to the hospital," Powell explains as she glares his way. "That's why."

"That's not his fault!" Nancy intervenes, also glaring at Powell. "He couldn't control it," she asks, shaking her head so emphatically that the end of her ponytail flies from side to side of her head with the movement.

"It?" Hopper asks, not missing that little nugget of truth that Nancy unwittingly dropped. "What's *it*? What can't he control?" Before Nancy can explain, however— or attempt to dodge the question somehow, as it may be— Joyce demands the handcuffs come off and an argument erupts as the supplies they just bought are brought out of Jonathan's car. It's a little difficult to explain what two teenagers are planning to do with a bear trap, but Hopper wants to hear it.

Joyce can't believe it's the first she's hearing about it, either. "That is not good enough, Jonathan," she declares once the two of them are out in the hall, Nancy having stayed with Hopper in his office, still going over what they had learned about the creature that kidnapped Will. It had taken a demonstration for them to actually buy the whole super-strength thing— Flo would not be happy that the stapler she had left in Hopper's office that morning had "suddenly broken" in Jonathan's hand— but after that they followed along with everything else the teenagers explained, just trying to take it in stride.

Jonathan tries to assure her that he knows, that he's aware he should've told her, especially when it comes to his newfound strength, but she's not having it. "That's not even close. That's not

even in the— in the ballpark."

"I wanted to tell you, I just..." Jonathan starts, then cuts himself off as he thinks of how to put it. "I figured it wasn't important compared to what's going on with Will. I didn't want to distract you or anything."

"Jonathan, you're my son," Joyce assures him with a sigh. "Anything that's going on with you, I want to know. The fact that you suddenly developed unnatural strength? That's kind of a big deal. It's the kind of thing I *need* to know, as your mother. You need to tell me these things." She shook her head. "What if this thing took you, too? You risked your life... *and* Nancy's."

"I thought I could save Will," Jonathan insists. "I still do."

"This is not your problem to fix," Joyce throws back. "You may be super strong now, Jonathan, but that doesn't make you invincible, okay? You're still sixteen. You're still a child, *my* child, and you can't do this alone." She shoves at his shoulder frustratedly. "You act like you're all alone out there in the world, but you're not. You're not alone."

Jonathan gives himself over to his mother's concerned embrace and takes solace in the fact that even with literal monsters lurking around Hawkins, and sudden superpowers appearing with no explanation, at least there were some things in his life that still made sense.

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Dustin's pacing back and forth on the aisle between the seats when they hear it. Not at first, because he's also ranting— "I don't feel good about this. I don't feel good about this!"— and Lucas is responding equally bitingly, but after that it's quiet and Dustin, being closest to the front of the bus, both hears it and sees it.

Cars. Approaching fast.

The others join him at the front just in time to see three cars coming

in from three different sides, practically surrounding the bus. "Shit!" Dustin exclaims, just as Mike starts urging everyone to run to the back of the bus and hide. "Guys, wait!" Dustin calls out, however, not moving from his spot.

"Dustin, get back here!" Mike snaps urgently, but Dustin does not heed his warning. Instead, he closes his eyes tightly for a second and when he opens them, everything stops: The noise from the live engines can't be heard anymore, the wind isn't moving the tree leaves around the clearing anymore, and one of the three bad men that were just about to come grab them and possibly kill them is frozen halfway through exiting his vehicle, unmoving as a mannequin.

Dustin turns back to look at his friends and sees that, just like that time in Mike's room, they are indeed still able to move. "I did it! I froze time again!" he declares with a bright grin. Just as his friends are about to cheer, though, Dustin starts feeling that tug at his stomach again, and his smile drops. "Guys, we gotta go. Quick."

Noticing how deadly serious he is, none of them object, and the foursome make their way out of the bus, pushing each other out of the way to get at each of their bikes, which they had hidden underneath it, and past the bad men's cars. Just as they're out of sight of the junkyard, though, they come across another vehicle, also frozen in time, but this one unrelated to Hawkins lab: it is the chief's truck, with Hopper himself at the wheel.

"Go, go, go, go!" Dustin urges them in the direction of the Blazer. Though there's a small kerfluffle when all of them try to get their bikes into the trunk of the truck at the same time (Eleven has to shove all three of them in with her powers, and Dustin can only hope his precious bike hasn't gotten dinged in the process), they do eventually make it onto the back seat, Mike closing the door behind him just as Dustin feels the tug give way.

The car lurches forward like it had never stopped, but it takes Hopper a second to realize that his back seat is suddenly occupied.

"Jesus Christ!" he exclaims, his foot instinctively stomping on the brake pedal. The car halts so abruptly that Lucas smashes his face against the back of Hopper's seat, Dustin almost flies through the

windshield, and Mike, who was sitting mostly sideways as he was the last to come in, can't find anything to hold on to, so he ends up in the gap between the back seat and the front seat, hands grabbing at El's ankles like they could somehow stop his momentum. (News flash: they couldn't.)

Hopper looks at them through the rearview mirror with a stunned expression. "How the *hell* did you—"

"It's a long story," Mike cuts him off as he pushes himself up to the seat again, Eleven scooching a little to the side to give him space. "You probably wouldn't believe us if we told you."

Hopper scoffs. "Lot of *that* going around today." Before any of them can ponder what *that* means, Lucas reminds them all that the bad men are just over the hill and definitely looking for them. Hopper immediately sets the car in reverse. "All right, we're heading back to the Byers', and once we get there, you four are going to tell us everything that's been going on. And I mean *everything*, you got that?"

It's obviously a rhetorical question as, before any of them could open their mouth to reply, Hopper floors the gas pedal and the car screeches backward. Much to their chagrin, the four of them go flying off their seats once again.

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Joyce slams the car door closed behind her when she's firmly seated inside. "So, what's the plan?" she asks, taking a deep breath to steel himself for whatever it is Hopper's about to tell her. She's scared out of her wits, but she'll do anything to get her boy back.

"Don't worry about it," Hopper replies as he sets the Blazer in reverse. "I know how to deal with these guys. I got this."

"What do you mean, 'you got this'?" Joyce throws back, almost offended that she's being sidelined, even though she knew he would try and do that. He's a cop, so he just assumes it's up to him to handle

these things. "I can't just stand there! Tell me how I can help."

"You don't need to do anything, Joyce," Hopper insists as he pulls the car out of the gravel-covered parking space in front of the Middle School gym. "I'll handle it. Once we're in that Upside Down place and looking for Will, that's when I could use two pairs of eyes."

"But—" She's about to point out that she has skills that could be *useful*, but then she remembers that she'd never actually told him what she could do. They'd been so busy focusing on the kids and everything that was going on with them that her newfound psychic abilities had completely slipped her mind.

"I can read people's minds," she blurts out as they drive on a wide curve around the edge of the forest, and it's a miracle they didn't outright drive straight into a tree with the way Hopper's head snaps from the forest to her face, an incredulous expression marking his features.

He looks at her, his eyebrows arching high on his forehead. "You can... read people's minds..." he repeats, not so much as a question but as a statement he simply can't wrap his mind around. *She can't be serious. The stress must be getting to her.*

"Yes, I'm serious, and *no*, it's not the stress," she snaps back and sees his expression morph into realization as she repeats his thoughts, ones he hasn't voiced out loud, right back at him. She scoffs and shakes her head. "Honestly, Hopper. Stranger things have happened."

Hopper runs the hand that isn't holding the steering wheel over his mouth and chin, ruffling his mustache in the process. He's looking at the road rather than at her, but she doesn't need to be a mind reader to recognize that in his mind he's probably running down a list of every single weird thing they'd encountered this week, starting with but not limited to the fact that they were on the way to rescue her son from a hostile alternate dimension.

"You got a point there," he concedes. He doesn't fill her in on any more of his plan, but she doesn't ask again because soon enough, they're nearing the premises of Hawkins Lab. They get out of the car, and she notices that Hopper doesn't even bother getting a bolt cutter

from the trunk as they approach the chain-link fence.

"Are you planning on climbing the fence, or...?" she lets her voice trail off as she looks at the top of the fence, which is helpfully decorated with coils of barbed wire. "I'm sure you've got many good qualities, Hop, but I don't think climbing is one of them."

"Ha ha," he replies sarcastically, before turning fully toward her and extending his arm toward her. "Give me your hand."

She looks at his hand dubiously, then up at his face. "What for?" She huffs. "Hopper, I don't think this is the time for—"

"There's a point to this, I swear. Just give me your hand," he insists, and before she can move he's grabbing it, and pulling her closer to the fence. Once they're standing right in front of it, he pushes his free hand against chain-link metal material... and then right *through* it.

She stares, eyes as wide as plates, at the wires currently sticking out of the man's wrist, then back at Hopper's face, then back at his wrist, then back at his face again. "When were you planning on telling me you could do this?" she asks, utterly baffled at what she is seeing. *Stranger things, indeed*, she thinks to herself. It isn't just her and Hopper, but the kids and Jonathan, too— where are all these weird superpowers coming from?

"We'll talk about it when it starts making sense," Hopper mumbles under his breath, but the night is quiet enough that she hears it loud and clear. Before she can properly prepare for what's about to happen, he's pulling her forward and *through* the fence just as his hand had, and Joyce swears it's the weirdest feeling she's ever felt in her life— at least up until that moment.

The awkward wonder doesn't last long, though, because break-in or no break-in, soon enough they're caught by the lab's security and taken inside at gunpoint.

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"Six."

"What?" Joyce asks, confused as to why this man is even here, why they are keeping her locked up in this room while her son is out there in that... *place*... probably fighting for his life. What is the point of *talking* right now?

"Six," Brenner repeats. "Six people have been taken this week." *That's six too many to be explained away in a small town like Hawkins*, his thoughts come through loud and clear, even as his actual voice softens in a poor imitation of compassion. "This thing that took your son... we don't really understand it.

"But its behavior is predictable," he adds. "Like all animals, it eats. It will take more sons. More daughters." *More than we have the manpower to contain*, she hears in the silence between his sentences. *It's bad enough that the first one out of the gate turned out to be a child—that's guaranteed to keep everyone's attention on this story*, he laments in his head, sounding much more frustrated than his tone would imply. *There's got to be a way to study that other dimension without requiring this much clean-up.*

It's that, more than anything, that pisses Joyce off something major. How dare he? He got her son into this mess simply because he wanted to study another dimension? He just said that six people were missing and he couldn't give a rat's ass for any of them! What kind of monster was this man?

That's why, as Brenner goes on and on about wanting to save people — wanting to save *Will*— but needing her help to do so, Joyce's jaw clenches tightly. "*Stop*," she all but orders him with a glare. "I know who you are. I know what you're *thinking*. I know what you've done." She shook her head. "You took my boy away from me! You left him in that place to die! You— faked his death! We had a *funeral*, we buried him. And now you're asking for my help?"

She leans forward and pins him with a stare dripping with fury. "You don't care about any of those people. You don't care about *my son*. All you care about is your crazy experiments gaining you some kind of recognition so you can get out of here and not have to deal with the *clean-up*," she declares, knowing very well that her words rang true.

Brenner's eyes widen for a second in realization before narrowing in suspicion. "How did you know—"

She doesn't let him finish. "Go to hell," she throws back at him, and leans back in her chair, crossing her arms defiantly. Unless his next words are "you can go save your son," she's not interested in anything this man has to say.

He studies her quietly for a minute or so while she seethes, as if measuring what he could say or offer to get her to speak. Eventually, however, it seems like he understands she's never going to help him, because he pushes his chair back and stands up, making his way to the door.

Joyce barely has a second to react. "Where are you going? Let me go get my son! You—" But before she can follow him out the door, she's pushed back by two guards who then close the door between her and the man that holds her son's life in his hands. She bangs a fist against the door, more in frustration than with any actual purpose. Oh, how she wishes she had Hopper's ability to walk through solid objects right about then.

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Unbeknownst to Hopper, his ability to walk through solid objects is the only reason why he's not being tortured right now.

They did put him in handcuffs when they brought him in, though he knows he could get out of those in a second. He won't, though. They've got three of their goons on him at all times and he doesn't want to give them the advantage of knowing what he can do. The element of surprise is the best ace he has up his sleeve.

His old friend the head of Security leans forward on the table from the opposite side Hopper is sitting at and pins him with a glare. "Okay, I'm asking again: What do you know?"

Hopper meets his gaze right on. He would've crossed his arms for

effect, but— well, handcuffs. "Did I stutter?" he says instead, figuring these bozos can use as much attitude as he can dish out. "Everything."

The man bangs his hands against the table in frustration, probably wishing the table was Hopper's face. "I really wish I could tase you right now," the man hisses, pulling close so his lower voice traveled.

"Oh, yeah?" Hopper retorted. "And why don't you?" He knows they could do much worse; they hadn't had any qualms about killing Benny, and given everything that happened with Will's fake body, they obviously have the resources to cover up any collateral damage that comes up. So why are they being so hands off with him?

It couldn't just be that he was the chief of police. Sure, his job gave him a higher profile in town than poor Benny the diner guy, but surely they could find a thousand and one ways to make his death or disappearance look like an accident; God knew he drank and popped pills enough to make it easy for them. So what was it?

The man doesn't take his bait. "What do you know?" he asks again, and this time Hopper tells him. He needs to let them know that despite him being in cuffs and locked in this interrogation room right now, he's holding all the cards.

"Here's what's gonna happen," he warns them as he stares all three of them down. "You're gonna let me and Joyce Byers go. You're gonna give us anything we need, and we're gonna find her son. And then we're gonna forget that any of this ever happened."

"Oh, is that right?" the man retorts.

"Yeah, that's right," Hopper repeats, and for a moment he thinks he's got them. It isn't until the three minions leave and Brenner enters the room himself that he realizes there's a piece of the puzzle he's been missing.

"You gotta give me your word," he tells the man, hoping that the leverage he had on them was enough to twist their metaphorical arm. "Nobody's ever gonna find out about this. And those other three kids, those boys, you're gonna leave them alone. Then I'll tell you," he added, the words tasting bitter in his mouth as he said them. He was

selling out a little girl to these monsters. What the hell was wrong with him? "Tell you where your little science experiment is."

Brenner looks at him clinically for a moment before crossing his arms. "Alright," he says in a conciliatory manner before his tone sharpens. "But I also want you to tell me how you dodged that bullet."

Hopper stares at him trying to keep his best poker face on, but on the inside he's freaking out. Crap, they knew about the phasing. That's why they didn't tase him. Great, what now? "Don't even bother pretending you don't know what I'm talking about," Brenner adds. "I've got you on tape."

"I don't know how it works," Hopper admits, figuring he's caught in a corner anyway. "It just started happening a few days ago. I don't know what started it, but I figure it's got something to do with you people, because as far as I know I couldn't walk through walls before the Byers kid disappeared a week ago."

"And you don't know what triggered it?" Brenner asks. Hopper once again reiterates that he has no friggin' clue how any of this started. After a moment of silence, Brenner leans forward on the table, much like his head of Security had earlier, but somehow managing to seem even more predatory. "Then you're going to let me study it."

"Study it?" Hopper repeats, hoping he doesn't mean what he thinks he means.

"You," Brenner clarifies, and it chills Hopper's blood. "You come into the lab once every few weeks so we can run some tests and try and figure the limits of your... ability. You don't put up a fight, just let us do what we need to do and I'll let you know when we have no need of you anymore." His eyes narrow. "I want the girl, your consent to this, and everybody walks out of this safe and sound."

Hopper swallows the panic rising in his chest when he sees a glint of victory in the scientist's eyes. Tests? What kind of tests? His mind is only too eager to provide him with a series of dark scenarios where he's poked and prodded like a lab rat, but he has no right to complain. He's putting a little girl in an even worse situation than he

will be, and at least if he has periodic access to the lab, he'll be able to keep an eye on her— or maybe even get her out of there someday.

He's a grown-ass man and a cop, and he can allow this one thing out of his control in order to save everyone's goddamn lives. The right choice is obvious. "Yeah, okay," he croaks out through a dry throat. "But you touch a single hair on any of those kids' heads, and the deal's off."

"It won't be," Brenner assures him before pushing off the table and straightening up to his full height. "I presume you can get out of those on your own?" he said with some derision, nodding at the handcuffs around Hopper's wrists.

"Ah, yeah," Hopper says dismissively as he pulls his hands out of the metallic grip like the cuffs weren't even there. He can see Brenner's eyes laser-focus on the movement, the man's eyebrows rising slightly in inherent curiosity.

Whatever. There'll be plenty of chances for him to gawk when this mess is over. Hopper stands up, the feet of his chair screeching as they scrape against the tiled floor, and rubs his wrists. "Now, take me to Joyce and then to the rift. Will doesn't have much time."

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Turns out, embedding nails into a baseball bat is a lot easier when you have super strength. Jonathan doesn't even need to use the hammer.

Once they have everything set up, and they've gone over the plan what feels like five hundred times, they sit there on Jonathan's couch, each mentally weighing what they are just about to do. "This is insane," Jonathan comments as he looks down at the sharp blade of the knife he's holding in his hand. He looks up at Nancy. "Do you think I can even cut myself?"

Nancy pauses for a moment, but then the corners of her lips start

curling up into a smirk. "You're super strong, not invulnerable," she points out smartly.

"You don't actually know that," Jonathan retorts, feeling himself start to smile as well.

Nancy shrugs. "Easy enough to prove," she says, then she raises a hand and flicks Jonathan on his forehead. He feels the sting and lets out an "ow!" which causes Nancy to chuckle. "See? Not invulnerable." Jonathan shakes his head as he rubs at his forehead. Nancy sobers up a bit as he does. "What do you think gave you your powers?"

It's his turn to shrug. "I don't know." He looks at her and sees that she's looking curiously around the living room. "Lotta weird things happening around this house, though. Maybe that's it."

"Maybe I'll get a superpower of my own, then," Nancy comments, continuing her visual exploration of Jonathan's house. It was hard to picture what it would look like without all the hanging Christmas lights, but it seemed like a cozy place.

"What makes you think you don't already have one?" Jonathan counters, tapping his fingers against the flat of the knife. "Maybe your superpower is being super smart. We'd never be able to tell the difference."

She has no response for that, but he does see her cheeks redden. He tries to squash down the feeling of success the gesture gives him, reminding himself that she has a boyfriend. She seems to be thinking along the same lines, though, because she abruptly clears her throat. "Okay, we've put this off long enough. Let's do this."

"You ready?" Jonathan asks. She replies in the affirmative, and he adds, "On three." As he starts counting down, however, he sees the fear in her expression. "You don't have to do this—" he starts, but she interrupts him.

"Jonathan, stop talking."

"I'm just saying, you don't have to—"

"Three!" She takes the initiative and since she's already cutting

herself, Jonathan has to follow suit. It stings like hell, and blood promptly starts pouring out, so— yeah, definitely not invulnerable. Nancy was right. Again.

They make sure to smear the blood around as well as they can before they bandage their wounds, and just as they're wrapping everything up, the least expected person comes knocking. It's as Nancy tries to send Steve away— even at gunpoint if necessary!— that the Christmas lights start to blink.

"Nancy," he calls out, but she's so busy trying to get Steve to go that she doesn't hear him. "Nancy!" he tries again to no avail. "*Nancy!*" It's the third time that he calls out to her that she finally hears him. "The lights."

They're ready for it when the beast appears, if one can ever be ready for such a thing. Between Steve freaking out and Nancy shooting at it, however, Jonathan has to almost carry them both toward Will's room so they don't end up as sitting ducks. They wait for the yo-yo to move but it never does, and eventually they walk back out again, to see that the creature has disappeared.

Steve takes his chance to leave, which, honestly, Jonathan is glad for, as it meant one less person to protect from the monster. Just as soon as the door closes behind him, though, the lights start blinking again, and the creature is upon them.

It jumps on Jonathan and he's thankful for the first time for his super strength when he manages to push it off what feels like a split second before it takes a bite out of his head. Unfortunately for him, though, he's not super fast, so he can't reach it in time when Nancy starts shooting at it and it decides she'll make for an easier target. That's when Steve comes back in and, managing to grab the bat Jonathan had dropped earlier, swings like a pro and saves Nancy's life. That's when Jonathan decides that even though he doesn't particularly like Steve, he can admit that he's actually a fairly decent guy.

When it's all over, they're not sure that they killed it, but they're pretty sure that they at least hurt it. Hopefully that would be enough. When the lights start blinking again— differently, less frenetically this time— Jonathan feels relief. "Mom?" he calls out, unsure that she

was listening, but hoping. She had heard Will through the wall between dimensions, after all. Something tells him she's listening this time, too.

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Is that you? Mom...

"Jonathan?" Joyce asks, stopping in her step and turning around abruptly. She doesn't know where the voice is coming from but she heard it clear as day, so she looks around hoping to pinpoint the source. She can't find it.

"Joyce, come on," Hopper calls out to her from a few paces ahead, but when she doesn't move, he has no choice but to stop so that she doesn't get left behind. "What is it?" he asks, every sense in him telling him it's probably not a good idea for them to stop moving. They're in an unknown dimension and have no idea what might be stalking them in this place.

"Did you hear that?" she asks him in return, still looking around for a disembodied voice. "I thought I heard someone calling out..."

"I didn't hear anything," Hopper tells her, but he can see that she's distraught about this and they won't be able to move on until she's satisfied that whatever she heard was not just in her imagination, so he prompts, "Is it like when you read people's thoughts?"

"I don't know. Maybe?" Joyce replies, sounding unsure. "I think it was Jonathan, and he sounded..." She shakes her head, her expression looking like she was trying to reach for something that she couldn't quite grasp. "I think he's nearby..."

"They're supposed to be at the middle school, watching the kids," Hopper reminds her, and it only makes her confused frown deepen. "Joyce, we'll figure it out later, okay? Right now we have to find Will. We don't have much time," he insists.

"You're right," Joyce concedes, but her gaze is still lost somewhere toward the front door of what passes for her house in this disgusting place. It takes her a few seconds to get herself together. "You're—you're right. Let's go." She lets him lead her toward the back of the house and toward Castle Byers, where they will hopefully find her little boy and get him back home.

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Mike, Dustin, and Lucas have never thought about how cramped the hallways at their school are until they have to run through them four at a time, all the while dodging bullets. "Go go go go!" Mike screeches at the rest when they run straight into a group of guards with semiautomatics aimed straight at them.

The foursome quickly spins on their heels and heads for the opposite end of the hallway, only to come face to face with a second group of guards, equally armed. "Freeze!" the agent at the front of the pack warns them.

That is exactly what Dustin does. Freeze them in time, that is.

"Everyone okay?" he asks when he's completely sure that the guards aren't moving from their position.

His friends all nod. "We have to get out of here," Mike urges, and they take off into a run again, past the guards and toward the emergency exit at the back of the school.

Lucas gets there first and tugs at the handle. "Dammit!" he exclaims once he realizes the door is locked. The other two boys groan in disappointment themselves. "What do we do now?" he asks, looking at his friends' frustrated expressions.

"Dustin, if you can actually teleport, this would be the time to do it," Mike prompts. These sudden bursts of superpowers had gotten them this far, right? So he's hoping against hope that his curly-haired friend has an ace up his sleeve.

Unfortunately for him, Dustin only shakes his head. "I don't even know if I can hold them like this for much longer," he admits, a hand rubbing at his tummy for some reason.

Mike tries the door again, just in case. Nothing happens. "There's got to be a window somewhere we can open," he suggests, looking around for the nearest classroom. Which one of his teachers was it that liked to open the windows in the fall even though it got super cold outside some days?

"And then what?" Lucas argued, always the strategic thinker. "You know they'll have the whole building surrounded. And they have cars! We won't have time to get far enough away."

"So you take Eleven and fly away with her," Mike says, determined.

Eleven intervenes for the first time in the conversation with a firm "No!" and for once Lucas agrees with her. "No way! What about you two?"

Mike shakes his head. "It's not us they want, it's her. That's why we gotta make sure she gets out of here safely." He purses his lips momentarily. "Besides, they won't kill us. We're just kids; they wouldn't outright shoot kids."

"Oh, like they didn't kill Will?" Lucas retorts with a scoff.

"They didn't kill Will, they *pretended* to kill Will."

"Well, technically they let loose a monster that kidnapped Will," Dustin interjects in a matter-of-fact tone, "and then they covered up the disappearance by pretending Will died in an accident."

"*The point is*," Mike declares in the most authoritative tone he can muster, "one kid is an accident, three kids is suspicious. They're trying to scare us with those guns, but they're not *really* going to harm us."

"So your main argument is that they won't kill you because you're too cute to die," Lucas summarizes with a roll of his eyes. "Great. That's great. I don't even know that I can carry Eleven with me while I'm flying! She might be too heavy or something, I don't really know how

it all works."

"No," El insists against the idea, shaking her head emphatically, her eyes pleading at Mike not to go through with this plan.

"Guys..." Dustin intervened, the hand at his tummy slowing down as he came to some realization.

Mike forces himself to ignore both of them. "So? You have to at least try!" he replies to Lucas instead, figuring that was the most urgent matter.

"And you want me to try for the first time while we're dozens of feet in the air?" Lucas throws back, and at that point even Mike has to admit his objections make sense. But what else can they do?

"There's gotta be a way—" Mike starts, but he's interrupted by Dustin calling out to them a little more forcefully this time around. "What?" Mike snaps, annoyed that he's the only one throwing out any ideas.

"Whatever we're going to do, we have to do it *now*," Dustin declares, urgency coloring his every word. "I don't think we have much..." He trails off, hand fisting around the fabric of his t-shirt. "Nope, it's over. Time's moving forward again."

Mike and Lucas's gazes meet, eyes wide, as it hits them that the lab goons are coming for them right now, and they are almost literally backed into a corner. "Run!" Mike exclaims, and the four of them make a mad dash down the hallway.

They turn the opposite corner from where they'd come from originally, hoping there will be fewer guards in that direction, but they have no luck as they are almost immediately confronted with another group of armed men. "Stop right there!" the one right at the front warns them just as Dustin waves his hands and freezes them again.

"Past them, past them!" Mike urges them without stopping, and they pass between the bad guys, headed toward the main entrance instead. The lab people have to be coming in from somewhere, right? So that one at least has to be open, and if Dustin can keep time frozen just

long enough to let them get a head start...

"I think it's gonna be a shorter freeze this time, guys!" Dustin warns them as they run, dumping a bucket of ice-cold water on Mike's half-thought-out plans. "I can feel it going away already!"

"Hold it for as long as you ca— whoa!" Mike stops speaking abruptly as he comes face to face with the barrel of a handgun, pointed at him by a woman with blonde hair backed up by a bunch of men with rifles. "Dustin!" Mike pleads, and his curly-haired friend waves his hands in front of him again, but this time the bad men keep moving closer.

"Back, back!" Mike signals for them to turn around, but as they all spin on their heels, they realize there's a second group of armed men coming their way from the opposite end of the hallway. They're cornered. Again.

"Do something!" Lucas begs either of his friends, but as much as both Dustin and Mike try, time's running forward no matter what. Just as they're sure the woman's going to put a bullet through their heads, Eleven steps forward and uses her powers to crush their brains inside their skulls.

And then there's just blood. Blood everywhere.

Eleven faints from the effort, and before the boys can shake her awake they're snatched by the group of guards coming from behind them, just in time to see a tall white-haired man kneel down next to her. He speaks to her like he knows her, like he cares, but the actual words he's saying are dark and manipulative, and Mike knows, he just knows, that this is the man who kept El trapped inside that lab her entire life. This is the man who forced her to release the creature that took Will. He's the monster.

Eleven makes it more than clear that she doesn't want to go back to the lab with the man— not that she can do anything about it in her condition, nor can the boys, trapped as they are— but then the hallway lights start flickering and they're all distracted by the appearance of the Demogorgon.

The men who are holding them let them go so they can start shooting at the beast, and the boys take their chance to grab Eleven and lock themselves inside the nearest classroom, which turns out to be Mr. Clarke's. Eleven is still mostly out of it so Dustin sets her down on one of the desks, and Mike moves forward to talk to her and hold her hand.

They're not dumb. They know that thing is going to get through all the armed guards like they're nothing, and once it does, there's a pretty good chance it will find them locked inside a room they can't get out of. But Mike has to be positive, has to think of a future after that night, because the other option is getting eaten by a monster and thinking about that isn't going to do them any favors.

But reality comes knocking, and when the Demogorgon does finally make its way to the science classroom, they have nothing to use to fight against him except a slingshot. It doesn't affect the creature in the slightest and just as they're sure they're monster chow, *something* pushes the beast away from them abruptly, pinning it against the blackboard.

El makes her way between them and to the front of the room as they look at her in shock, but this time Mike isn't awed— he's terrified. Her gaze is fixed on the monster with a fiery darkness lurking behind her eyes, and Mike is suddenly terrified that she's going to do something dangerous. Something irreparable.

His feet are urging him forward before he even realizes what he's doing. "Eleven, don't—!" he pleads, but before he can even finish the sentence she waves her hand behind her and Mike feels himself being lifted off the ground and thrown several feet back in the air until his back hits the wooden cabinets where Mr. Clarke stores the Bunsen burners. It hurts, but not as much as the knowledge that he can't move— she's pinning him in place, and he can't reach her.

So he closes his eyes and tries to feel Dustin's presence nearby, Dustin's *powers* nearby, concentrating so hard that he almost forgets to breathe through the sobs constraining his throat. When he opens his eyes he hopes and prays that he's managed to stop time, but instead he can only see El's face as she looks back at him over her shoulder and says, "Goodbye, Mike."

No.

"Dustin!" he screams in desperation as El turns back to the monster, starting to use her powers with such a strength that it feels like the entire room is shaking. Out of the corner of his eye he sees his friend close his eyes and start to concentrate, but nothing's happening. "Come on!"

"I'm trying!" Dustin responds through gritted teeth, fists clenched and trembling from the effort he was putting into it.

"*Dustin!*" Mike insists, with so much fear and hope and despair in that one word that his voice cracks as he says it. In front of them, the monster starts twisting as much as it can in that pinned-back position, and howling as if in pain.

"I'm *trying!*" Dustin repeats, and that's the last of their dialogue as that's when El starts *screaming*, and the loud sounds emanating from both her and the monster overtake any other attempt at communication in the room.

Then the monster starts to dissolve into ashes that remain afloat in the air and cover their view of the front of the room. When the screaming stops and the ashes begin to fall to the ground, the Demogorgon is gone.

And so is Eleven.

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"You okay?"

"The Demogorgon," Will says, voice still a little raspy from his coughing fit. "It got me."

"We know. It's okay," Mike assures him straight away, not wanting Will to feel bad about something he had no control over. All that matters is that he's back with them now, safe and sound. "It's dead,"

he adds. "We made a new friend. She stopped it. She saved us." His expression falls. "But she's gone now..."

Everybody's silent for a second after he says that, as if remembering her, missing her— Mike's heart aches all over again, reliving the moment she disappeared— until Dustin chimes in: "Her name's Eleven."

"Like the number?" Will asks, and his tone is so bewildered that it makes them all chuckle, immediately breaking the somber mood.

"Well, we call her 'El' for short," Lucas clarifies, and then a short debate emerges about whether Eleven is more like Yoda than like a wizard, and then they all seem to remember at the exact same moment that "Dude! We *all* have superpowers now!"

"For real?" Will asks, understandably skeptical. They don't blame him — he's missed a lot.

"Yeah!" Dustin eagerly launches into an explanation. "Lucas can fly, and I can manipulate time, and we think Mike can copy other people's powers, though I keep telling him that's probably cheating..."

"It's not cheating," Lucas intervenes, "power mimicry is a legit superpower—"

"Oh, you found a name for it now?" Dustin throws back.

"I've always known that's what it's called—"

"Actually," Mike interrupts before the whole thing can turn into one of Dustin and Lucas's infamous arguments about the science of comic books, "I think Will may have a superpower, too." The remark is predictably met with a barrage of "Whats?" "Huhs?" and "Are you serious?" from his friends, so he elaborates. "Remember that drawing you did that I asked you about the night you disappeared?" Will nods. "That was El."

"I drew Eleven without ever having met her?" Will asks, sounding surprised.

"Wait, you knew Eleven before we even met her?" Lucas asks with a

scoff, shoving at Mike's shoulder as if affronted. Mike is suddenly glad he never mentioned the whole dreaming-about-Eleven thing; he hadn't yet figured that one out, and he had no idea how he could ever explain it.

"Oh, man," Dustin starts, his mouth drawing into a shit-eating grin. "That explains so much," he declares with a loud snort.

Mike hisses at him to shut up, but that only makes Will more curious. "Why? What is it?"

"Oh, nothing," Dustin replies in a tone that suggests it is anything but. And then he starts singing. "Just, you know, *Mike and Eleven, sittin' in a tree...*"

"Shut up!" Mike says and lunges at Dustin to try and cover his mouth as Lucas and Will laugh. Dustin tries to dodge him, still singing the song ("...then comes baby in a *floating* carriage..."), and it all eventually devolves into a mock wrestling match.

"Hey, hey!" Jonathan calls out to them from behind. "You can't be roughhousing in here, this is a hospital!" He shakes his head as he taps the boys' shoulders to get them to stop. His mother had just left the room to grab something to eat and it was up to him to keep order. "And what's this about Will having superpowers, too?"

The trio launches into a convoluted explanation of everything that's happened in the past few days (starting with the flipped-over van, because *of course*) and Jonathan stands back and lets them. They are noisy and overexcited and they keep tripping over each other trying to out-cool their reveals.

But in the back of Mike's mind, future!Dustin's words still resonate: *Save the lost child, save the world*. Was Will the lost child? Did they save the world? It feels like they did, but he can't be sure. El is the one who's lost now— just lost, *not dead*, he has to believe that— and he doesn't know what that means for the prophecy.

He knows he only knew El for a week, but already his world feels wrong without her in it. And although having Will back is great news, he can't help but think that they failed— they failed the

prophecy, they failed *her*. It's something he can't stop thinking about, and something he will think about repeatedly over the year to come.

He doesn't mention this to his friends, not wanting to bring them down. Friendship is a healing balm, and at least if they focus on the more exciting aspects of the past week, they don't have to think about the sadder parts just now.

But the next day, when they're all back home and back to normal after having dealt with federal agents the entire night and the entire morning, Mike allows himself to think about it. After dinner, he excuses himself and sneaks down to the basement, where he painstakingly rebuilds El's blanket fort until it looks like it's always been there, like she's always been there. Except she's not.

With a sigh he grabs his Supercomm and crawls in, legs crossed Indian-style as he brings the device up to his lips.

"El? Can you hear me? It's me, Mike. It's... it's been one day since you disappeared, but I know... I know you must be out there somewhere. Are you? If you're listening, please let me know. Give me a sign. Tell me how I can find you..."

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Notes: I think I managed to traumatize my poor bb Mike even more than he originally was in the show. Um. Oops?

I do plan on doing season two as well, but I have no idea when that's going to happen. I'm about to go on vacation literally tomorrow, and on top of that things are happening in my real life— good things, to be sure, but time-consuming things nonetheless— so I don't know when I'll have time to rewatch season two, let alone write another 24K-word monster anytime soon. Stay tuned to my Tumblr at *girls-are-weird*; if I start writing it, I'm likely to post snippets of it over there. I might go back to the *Quiet Moments* series before I get to it, though.

In the meantime, feel free to speculate on the as-yet-unexplained parts of this in the comments! *crickets* Yeahhh, I know the fandom's kinda dead right now, and the show being on hiatus until next summer seems almost unbearable, but I'd love to hear what you guys think about this and what you think you'll see once I get to writing season two. So don't be shy! I don't bite, I promise. :)